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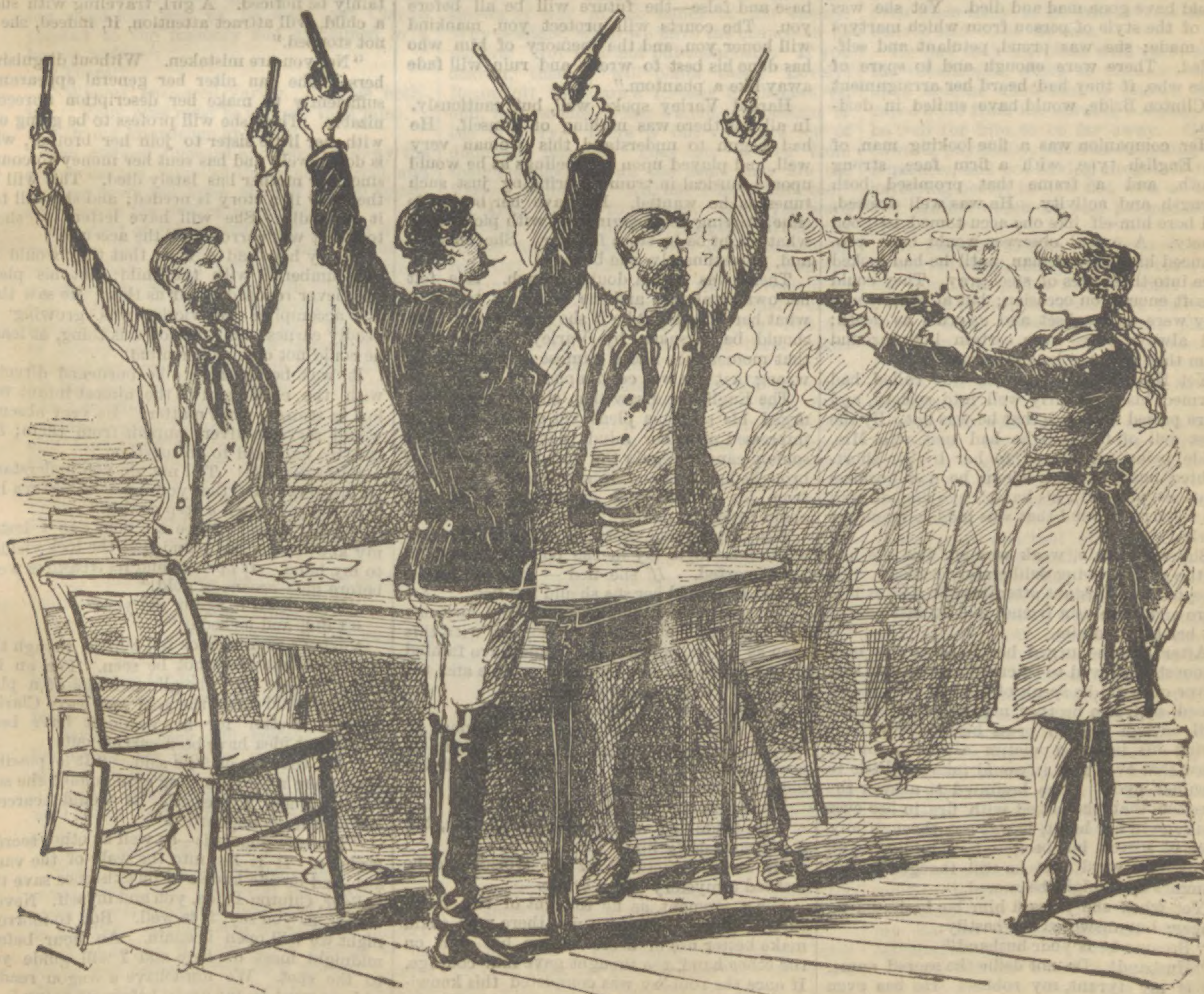
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No. 192

THE LIGHTNING SPORT; Or, THE BAD MEN AT SLAUGHTER BAR.

BY WILLIAM R. HYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC., ETC.



"HANDS UP!—I SAY! IT'S LITTLE LIDE THAT'S TALKING, AND SHE'S LIVELY ON THE SHOOT!"

The Lightning Sport;

OR,

The Bad Men at Slaughter Bar.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
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SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY
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CHAPTER I.

A KNAVE AND A FOOL.

"Oh, Harold, save me! Heaven knows that I have meant no wrong, though my folly has brought me to where I can see before me an open grave. Another step and I am gone. He suspects!"

"Wrong, my angel. It is you that have been wronged—foully, brutally wronged. Your life has been burdened with the weight of this man's penury, insolence and blows."

"No, not blows; that I would never have borne. But all the rest is true, and now he suspects me of crime—I, whose only fault is that I accepted sympathy when my heart was breaking under his savage rule. He has robbed me of my youth, my love and my fortune. Yes, robbed me, since he took them all and gave me nothing in return."

"He is a villain indeed; yet for one reason I hesitated to call him such. Because—"

"Because what? Hesitate no longer. At the remembrance of the past I see no single reason to seal your lips."

The woman shook her long, glossy ringlets, and looked up fiercely, like a rising lion. Her weakness in a moment had been replaced by strength, and her mood, at the remembrance of what she believed to be her wrongs, had utterly changed.

She had a handsome face, too, this wife of Clinton Bride. Tall and graceful in form, regular features, clear hazel eyes, and soft shining chestnut hair that was still worn in flowing ringlets, and full red lips. She was in appearance a woman for whom many a man would have gone mad and died. Yet she was not of the style of person from which martyrs are made; she was proud, petulant and self-willed. There were enough and to spare of those who, if they had heard her arraignment of Clinton Bride, would have smiled in derision.

Her companion was a fine looking man, of the English type, with a firm face, strong mouth, and a frame that promised both strength and activity. He was well dressed, and bore himself like one accustomed to good society. A casual observer would have pronounced him a gentleman, until he had looked once into those eyes of steel-gray. They could be soft enough on occasion; but at other times they were as hard-set and as cruel as death; and always there were certain lines around them that bade the honest beware.

Yet Harold Varley, as he was called, had wormed his way fairly well into society, and there passed for much that he was not. By the most evil of fortunes he had met with Mrs. Bride, being introduced to her by her short-sighted husband, with whom he had business relations, and with his hawk's eye he had seen the festering wound that was hidden from the world.

She was a vain, weak woman; but she had no thought of being deliberately wicked. She accepted some distant attentions, looked at him more and more as a friend, and at last poured out her heart to him.

After that he urged her to leave the man whom she believed to be cruelly wronging her. Never once did he speak of himself except as a friend, such as a brother might be. He knew well enough how to press his plans without giving his intended victim a shock, for he knew that even now it would take but little to open her eyes. If he hesitated to answer the question that she asked with fire in her eyes and rage in her heart, it was not through any trick of speech, but because he actually feared to use the word that he still thought in her woman's eyes might be sacred.

Yet when she pressed him he hesitated no longer; but answered her hastily:

"Because he is your husband!"

"Husband! Do not defile the sacred name. He is my tyrant, my robber! He has even sent away from me my poor, afflicted son—born dumb as a punishment for his parents having

dared to utter in mockery the holy words of the marriage vows. He pretends that in youth he should receive other care than that which his mother can give him."

"Your son?"

The man seemed too surprised, however, to listen longer in silence. The mention of this son, of whom, as yet, he had never heard, was an unexpected shock. So far he had known only of a puny, sickly little child—a daughter, who at one moment the mother forgot, and the next spoke of with the most extravagant affection.

"Yes, my son. You are surprised to hear of this. Why should you be? It is only another evidence that madness must be lurking in his brain. Why else should he have thousands and thousands in gold heaped up idly in his secret safe in the cellar, when his business is tottering to a fall for the want of it?"

At the mention of thousands a glint of fire shot from the steel-gray eyes, and there was a suspicious twitching of the muscles of his hand, but he contented himself with murmuring:

"Yes, indeed. What else?"

"He thinks the secret of the safe unknown. I have watched him when he stole to his treasures to add to the hoard. Some day he will kill me and my child lest we obtain our share of it. Yet what can I do?"

"Leave him," answered Varley, firmly. "Yours is one of those cases that the law will not reach unless you first put yourself above the law. Leave him; and take advantage of that madness which has caused him to place within your reach, once more, the fortune that was yours when he befooled you into assuming his name. Here, I know, the courts are like iron against a woman seeking redress. Fortunately there are places where it is otherwise. In a year you can be rehabilitated with freedom. In the great, chivalrous West there will be no hesitancy when, armed with your facts, you come as a suppliant to this bar of justice. They will give you control of your name, your child, and your fortune. Young, rich, beautiful as a dream—wise by reason of cruel experience yet with a life no longer imbittered by daily contact with all that is base and false—the future will be all before you. The courts will protect you, mankind will honor you, and the memory of him who has done his best to wreck and ruin will fade away like a phantom."

Harold Varley spoke well, but cautiously. In all this there was nothing of himself. He had begun to understand this woman very well, and played upon her feelings as he would upon a musical instrument bringing just such tunes as he wanted. He gave her but little time, stirring her imagination with pictures of what might be in store for her. She heard—and, unfortunately, she believed.

There was still a doubt, though. She felt her own weakness, and she trembled to think what her fate might be if she moved and then should be forsaken by Varley. Perhaps at that moment she had a glimpse of the terrible wrong that she was contemplating!

The Englishman saw that she wavered, and urged his specious pleas, yet all the time he impressed upon her mind that she must find some means to regain the fortune that she had brought her husband if she wished to escape from his pursuit and eventually break his chain beyond a doubt.

His arguments were sound enough, too. Their false logic lay in the point from which they started. If she fled—but all reason should have told her she should not flee.

Yet she was blind, indeed. Had any one told her that she thought of eloping with this man as his paramour she would have fainted from the shock, and he was too wise and too wily to awaken her suspicions.

He urged her on, and she consented.

When that much was certain the manner of the man changed somewhat. He began to question in regard to that wealth which lay hidden in the secret safe.

What was the meaning of that?

Mrs. Bride had offered one explanation, but it did not satisfy him.

He knew something of the world, and he scented a mystery and a crime.

For a moment, as he thought of this, he in turn hesitated. No man was there who could make better use of a secret than he. But, on the other hand, the thought gave him courage. If once the robbery was completed this knowledge might be used to dull pursuit and take the edge off of the desire for vengeance.

So in serious earnestness they laid their plans; she to obtain the freedom for which she was sighing, he to capture the wealth, or a goodly share of it, for which he was yearning.

They clasped hands and separated; and as they parted they vowed that, lest suspicion might fall upon the innocence of their intercourse, they would meet no more until the time came to strike the blow.

And that time came all too soon; for before many days Varley received his first and only line from her:

"The hour is at hand."

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRET OF THE SAFE.

ON the verge of a crime opportunities sometimes arise that some might blasphemously call "providential."

It was so with Clarice Bride.

Before her resolution had had time to cool there came an hour when her somber-faced husband told her, in the hoarse whisper that of late had become habitual with him, that he would be absent for a few days, and even went so far as to offer a half-way sort of explanation of the cause of that absence. Then he went away, and Varley received the note which he had been waiting for so anxiously.

Some of his arrangements had already been made; hastily he perfected others, even before he went to meet the woman, who shivered with emotion at the sight of him.

If he could have seen her face, Varley might have supposed that she was mad indeed. He might, perhaps, even have been frightened from his scheme.

They met, though, in the obscurity of a summer-house, and it seemed nothing strange that there should be a quiver in her voice.

She had been thinking, too; and her plans had been matured.

She had a young nurse whom she believed she could trust, and she intended to intrust to her the little daughter who was already her care; and providing her with a ticket, ship the two to the promised land, by way of the steamer and isthmus route.

"But that is foolish—rash. She will certainly be noticed. A girl, traveling with such a child, will attract attention, if, indeed, she is not stopped."

"No, you are mistaken. Without disguising herself she can alter her general appearance sufficiently to make her description unrecognizable. Then she will profess to be going out with her little sister to join her brother, who is doing well, and has sent her money to come, since her mother has lately died. This will be the story if a story is needed; and she will tell it shrewdly. She will have letters to show too, that will corroborate the account."

Varley had had a hope that they would be unincumbered with the child; but his plans had never reached as far as this. He saw that his accomplice or victim was growing in deadly earnest, and that on this thing, at least, he could not change her mind.

It was better than to be burdened directly with the child; and if the almost infant was lost in transit, what matter! Is very absence would serve to divert pursuit from them; for the two expected to go together.

"But the safe? Tell me, do you understand its mystery? Of that you must be certain before you take such a step as this."

"I am certain, since an hour ago I tested my knowledge, and found that the lock yielded to my hand. It opened, and its treasures were before me—oceans of gold!"

"You closed it again, did you?"

"I did, and locked it."

Varley's countenance fell a little, though the subtle change could not be seen. For an instant he had had the glimmerings of a plan which should take the gold and leave Clarice behind. Better for her would it have been could that idea have been carried out!

"Ah, that is well," he said. "It is possible that there may be prying eyes among the servants. Such a treasure he would scarcely leave entirely unguarded."

"The safe guards it—as well as other secrets perhaps. It is let into the wall of the vault also, and no one knows of its existence save the builder, Clinton Bride, you and myself. Nevertheless, as you say, it is well. But to-morrow night we will open it again. An hour before midnight meet me here and I will guide you to the spot. We must have a wagon ready, and we must be far away before morning."

"We will be," he said, and held out his

hand, which she wrung a little desperately; but he knew that so far they were only a pair of plotters, and nothing more.

Then he went away, almost doubting that he was awake, and within the next twenty-four hours finished making ready.

When, at a distance and so carefully that he could not be compromised, he had watched the nurse depart, with the child, he knew he was safe, since Clarice had burned her bridges. Henceforth there was no retreat!

Meanwhile he had done his own work well.

There was no flaw in his plans. He believed that he could bodily disappear, and though no doubt suspicious lips would ask the question whether he had gone, Clinton Bride would find no trace of him or his wife until it was too late.

It was a grand stroke, and Harold Varley was just the villain to carry it through to a successful ending.

Yet it was with some trepidation of heart that he approached the lonely mansion of Clinton Bride on the succeeding evening. Because everything looked so certainly like success, he partially distrusted his chances.

No danger appeared to be lurking in the shadows; the road for retreat seemed perfectly open. Clarice met him, clasped his hand, and drew him away. Through the grounds they passed, without the sound of a footstep being heard. He even wondered at the woman's skill and courage. There were several servants in the house, and to waken one of them would be disastrous.

Down into the vaults they went, leaving the outer door unlocked and the other doors wide open. He had followed her closely in the darkness, holding her hand. Now he saw the glimmer of a faintly-burning lamp.

Clarice dropped his hand and turned up the wick of the lamp.

It even then only threw its glare of light on a little circle immediately surrounding it. The rear of the vault was wrapped in somber shadows.

In front of them was the wall of the vault, damp, solid, of heavy masonry. Several barrels were ranged in order along the side; a board leaned carelessly against the wall. Nothing suspicious was to be seen, yet Clarice pointed to the masonry and exclaimed in a hoarse whisper:

"There!"

"Where?" answered Varley. "I see nothing. Your eyes must be sharper than mine."

"Or my knowledge greater."

She stepped forward and pushed away the empty barrels, removed the leaning board, and holding down the lamp showed a knob apparently set in the wall of masonry.

The sight of this reassured him. For a moment he had thought the woman might be madder than he had believed; now he understood, and he watched her with intense eagerness. The safe that he believed contained a fortune was before them—would she be able to master the secrets of its fastenings? For himself he knew that even in hours, and with all the tools of the trade, he would not be likely to win an entrance.

Clarice never hesitated. She held the lamp still lower and carefully turned the knob to the right and the left, counting each time a different number of revolutions; these were little numbers that Varley could not see, though he leaned forward eagerly.

At last she gave a pressure on the knob and then another turn.

This time there was the faint rattle of shooting bolts. The safe was unlocked.

The sound affected them differently.

On the ears of the woman it fell like the knell of doom, even though she felt that she had gone too far to retreat.

To the man it seemed like a summons to a feast.

Clarice fell back still holding the lamp in her hands; her tempter sprung forward, and applied his strength to the knob.

At that what appeared a section of the stone wall rolled open, disclosing the interior of the safe.

Clarice was right.

There was more wealth there than one man could carry away; there was coin heaped up in stout canvas sacks, and notes wrapped together in bundles. Above them was a little compartment, closed by a door which yielded to his touch, and being thrown back showed several drawers, and in a pigeon-hole a heavy package of papers, wrapped with red tape.

"Ah!" thought he, as his eyes fell upon this. "Papers are sometimes worth their weight in gold. We will take this first."

He dropped the package into one of his capacious pockets, and then looked with a critical eye at the wealth before him. When he had lifted one of the little bags of gold he realized better the work that was before him, and rapidly made a mental inventory of the amount that he could carry away.

From his pocket he drew a stout sack, that had been tightly wrapped, and into this he tossed one after another of the smaller sacks. Into his breast pocket he thrust the bank-notes. He had as much as he could safely carry before the safe was half exhausted.

Then he looked into one of the little drawers; and immediately afterward gave a low exclamation of surprised delight.

"This, possibly, will be worth all the rest. Was there no end to this wretch's wealth."

The little box that he took out and opened seemed alive with light. Phosphorescent gleams, sparkling coruscations, rays of fire arose as he held it toward the lamp. It was filled with unset diamonds. For all he could tell at a hasty glance there might be another quarter of a million there. Varley was certainly on the threshold of a great mystery, perhaps a great crime.

Mrs. Bride seemed more surprised than her partner in guilt. She looked at the gems, for an instant, in silent amazement; then she threw up her hand.

"Put them back, put them back! They are not mine and I only want my own. Here is wealth, such as I brought him. Let us take it; but leave those jewels alone. Of them I know nothing!"

He scarcely heard her. His eyes were fastened on the glowing facets. He knew such things when he saw them and they fascinated him for the time like the changeful fires in the eyes of a rattlesnake. He made no answer.

"Put them back, put them back, I say. Do you think I would rob even that crawling thing, my husband? I only want my own."

"This is a campaign, my dear Mrs. Bride, and it would hardly be well to leave the sinews of war in the hands of the enemy. Why hesitate, when we have the chance to be victors? No! I cannot put them back. If you disown, then I will claim them. Lovely! Beautiful! They are a fortune in themselves; and, by heavens, at last I scent the bottom of the mystery. There is but one such set of diamonds missing. They are broken from their settings; but all the same they are the Vernon diamonds! Ah, ha! I have him, too!"

Clarice listened to the end. Her eyes were opening. In the place of the gentle friend the robber had appeared. She drew herself up proudly; and spoke firmly. If this was the way at the very outset that the movement to have her own way resulted how would it end?

"Put them back, I command you! Not another step will I go until I see them locked once more in that safe!"

"Too late, too late!" responded the other grimly. "I shall certainly not go back from the adventure; and it would be ruin for you to attempt to interfere. Besides, you cannot, without losing your child. She is already miles away. Thwart me now—break with me, your best friend, and I can vouch for it that you will never see her again."

She gave a faint scream and cowered back; then, without a thought of consequences to herself, her voice rose loud and clear:

"Help! murder! thieves! murder!"

With an awful curse, Varley hastily dropped the little box and sprung forward. He did not, perhaps, mean to kill; but from the back of his neck there leaped up a ready knife.

"Silence!" he ground out, in a thick whisper; and the blade hung over her fair white throat.

And then in the shadows beyond them sounded the noise of a light footstep.

Slight though the sound was, it came to his ready ears, and he half turned his head, listening. It might be imagination.

No freak of an overstrung brain was the idea.

While he hesitated there came from the darkness a flash, a sudden roar, the cry of a man mad with rage, and then—

There was a splintering of glass, the lamp dropped from the hand of Clarice, there was a dull thud, and up into the air leaped a great wave of flame, with Clarice in its midst, shriek-

ing, beating the air with her hand, a mass of glowing, dripping fire, that hung from her clothing and crept and writhed over the ceiling and among the litter where it had spattered.

Varley, just in time, had sprung back. Now he turned and fled. A single splotch of flame on his back marked his course through the darkness beyond.

Clinton Bride came forward out of the darkness and in the midst of the sudden flame and smoke, saw his wife dead or dying. He tossed the heavy bag into the safe, clanged to the door and sprung away in pursuit.

CHAPTER III.

LOST ON THE TRAIL.

THE cause of the fire at Clinton Bride's mansion remained a mystery; but not more so than the fate of its owner and the other awful events of the night, of which those who knew him could gain but a slight inkling from what they saw.

The servants made their escape with slim time to spare, and when the flames were shooting upward, and the glare was red on the midnight air, a throng had gathered; but human hands were helpless to stay the conflagration.

Most horrible of all, a little away from the building, a discovery was made that drew thither and stilled the roaring crowd as if by magic. It was the body of Mrs. Bride, fearfully burned and wrapped in her husband's overcoat.

People looked from it to the ocean of flame and back again. They ran hither and thither, asking frantic questions. They did not doubt but that Bride, having carried out the corpse of his wife, had rushed back in a vain attempt to rescue his daughter. Father, child and nurse were probably in the blazing building.

That was what the crowd thought, and it was what went out to the world through the columns of the daily papers the next day; and it reached the eyes of a fugitive, already far on his western way, who shuddered even while he gave a grim chuckle.

Somehow he doubted the truth of it all. He had that internal feeling that sometimes overcomes a man who knows that he is followed, even when there is no reason that he should believe such to be the case.

He had laid his plans with care; and after the catastrophe, which so unexpectedly came upon him, he knew that if Clinton Bride escaped alive from the burning building, it would be well for him to be far away. He was no coward, physically, but understanding the consequences, and not having altogether failed in gathering booty, he now fled with all the speed and caution which he had planned before the crisis.

He intended to take the overland trail; and he started alone, though he expected when once out upon the plains to join some company. Plenty of such little hands were there in those days, wearily crawling over the plains, and where so many were rushing toward the El Dorado in the West, no very complicated reason was needed why he should have joined the caravan.

Equipped with weapons, and a stock of provisions, he set out, his effects being drawn by a good, stout team, that, not being overloaded, could accommodate itself to the progress of any party, whether it might be fast or slow.

And so it was that one night he was encamped alone in a small open bottom just outside of the timber line of the rushing Missouri. In the roughly dressed man, with every look of a frontiersman about him, he did not have the least fear of being recognized as the genteel-looking man who had been engaged in a fugitive way in the business of a stock broker, and whose quiet manner and apparently honest heart had won upon the wife of Clinton Bride, with such fatally fascinating effect.

A little away from the smoldering fire, the light of which was no longer needed since the risen moon made all things almost as plainly visible as daylight would have done, ran the dark thread of the road, which led to the town and ford above. With a determination to adopt from the outset the ways of the man he intended to profess to be, Varley had driven on and camped for the night. A pile of blankets lay on the ground, and he was dreamily smoking his pipe.

To see him one would have supposed that he was at peace with himself and all the rest of the world.

Suddenly one of the two horses that were tethered near pricked up his ears and gave a low snort.

The movement escaped the eyes of the reclining man; but he heard the sound. On the instant he was on the alert. His hand dropped backward and grasped a pistol, while his glances rapidly swept the little dingle that lay spread out before him.

Then he heard the fast falling footsteps of an approaching steed, and a moment later horse and rider came into sight from beyond an edge of the bluff that reached down almost to the timber line.

They were coming cautiously. The hoof-strokes scarcely made an audible sound; and the rider, erect in his saddle, came on almost with the gliding motion of a ghost.

The fugitive looked keenly forward and recognized the man. Perhaps for the length of a beat or two, his heart seemed to stand still.

Then, with his outstretched hand grasping his weapon, he sprung to his feet; in a hoarse tone, utterly unlike the soft, silken ones that poor Clarice had heard, exclaiming:

"Halt! Who comes there?"

And the answer came ringing back:

"A foe of yours, Harold Varley—a foe of yours to the death!"

At the same instant the advancing man slipped nimbly off of the horse, on the side furthest from Varley.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, stranger, if you call me Harold Varley; but all the same, you stand there till we find out who you are. Men that talk that way don't prove welcome visitors at an honest emigrant's camp."

"Away with that nonsense, Harold Varley! I am Clinton Bride and I am here to take vengeance. If you are a man I will still give you one chance, for I am no cowardly assassin. Step forward from the shade and I will meet you in the moonlight."

From where Bride stood, Varley was invisible, since his form was lost on the black background of the timber.

"Step forward yourself, if you dare! One that skulks behind his horse scarcely is the one to boast of his courage."

"I accept your challenge, vile murderer. If there is a spark of courage in your craven soul you will meet me on even terms."

And stepping out from behind his horse, Clinton Bride walked boldly forward, a fair mark for a feline shot.

It was a temptation, yet something held the hand that was more than half raised, and out stalked Varley.

At a little distance he called a halt.

"No coward am I, but I want a chance for my life, now and hereafter. Halt right there and hear me."

"Devil! if I slaughtered you in your sleep it would be nothing that you did not deserve. Did you think you could escape me? From this spot one of us stirs not alive. If there is any justice in heaven or on earth, the one that remains here will not be I. I have trailed you to your doom."

"Justice in such matters is generally with the quickest hand, the surest eye. But, never mind that. I believe you propose a duel?"

"Wretch! no man could call it a duel without disgracing himself and me. I propose to allow you to defend yourself."

"Precisely; but I do not care to have myself hung for murder afterward, nor do I want you to run that risk. It amounts to a duel without seconds. If you were to shoot me where I stand, and were taken on the spot by some such casual passers as will thrust themselves in where they are not wanted, you would be treated to a short rope and no shrift."

"Unfortunate, but it cannot be remedied. Prepare yourself; I am going to fire."

"A moment. This seems to be a quiet, lonely place, where one could slumber well. A grave yonder by the cottonwood would suit me for a resting-place, and I doubt if ever it would be disturbed. Will you promise to bury me there?"

"Ay; as well there as elsewhere."

"And a grave there would suit one as well as the other. I have shovels in the wagon, let us dig it first. Whoever is the survivor will have a witness to his story should interruption come before his work is done."

"Yes, a grave, a grave! We will dig it together. One of us will lie there; the other will go his way. Oh, you are a wise man to think of it!"

The voice of Clinton Bride had a strange ring in it. His words were broken. Varley shook his head at the tones, for they sounded like those of one who was crazed. Nevertheless he retained his coolness, and he had made the proposition in sober earnestness. This man was on his track, and must be removed with as little danger as possible to himself.

"A moment, then," he responded, "until I can get the tools. See, I will lay my weapons down here, and you leave yours there. The spot where we will dig is about equally distant. When we have finished we will seek our revolvers, and the ball will open."

He sheathed his revolver as he spoke and deliberately cast down belt and all, throwing down his broad-brimmed sombrero to mark the spot.

The other did the same, and then the two stepped away, Varley going straight to his wagon, from which he procured a shovel and a spade.

Then he joined Clinton Bride, who awaited him just outside of the line of shade, at the spot Varley had pointed out, and who greeted him with a ghastly chuckle.

"I didn't think I'd ever help the man who robbed me of my wealth, stole and slew my wife and burned my child alive. But to help him dig his grave—that is better! Yet the dog deserves none."

Varley silently handed him the shovel, keeping the spade for himself, and without a word marked out the trench's limits. Into the soil were thrust the tools, and the work went on. Once beneath the sod and the sharp blades pushed easily down into the warm, mellow soil.

"Deep enough, is it not?" exclaimed Varley, at last, leaping out.

"A shovelful or two more at this end," answered the other. "Your head will then rest level. There; it is ready."

"Then lie in it!" shouted Varley, as he brought his spade down in one crushing blow, and Bride dropped in the grave, mute and quivering.

CHAPTER IV.

A POSSIBLE NEMESIS.

FOR a dozen or more years Clinton Bride had slept the dreamless sleep that knows no waking, and by chance or destiny his grave just beyond the shadows of the cottonwoods remained undisturbed.

No pursuit had there been, no questions asked, no suspicion of the secret that was buried there that night in the presence only of the nodding trees and the cold moonlight. Many another man had set out upon the trail that led westward from the river, and had been swallowed up without word of comment. Disease, outlaws, Indians, starvation—there were a hundred ways for taking off. And then Clinton Bride was a stranger there, whom none had noticed, while away back east they were vainly searching the charred ruins for the corpses which they could not find.

The assassin went his way with a real sense of relief. He had feared this madman whom he had slaughtered more than he did judge or jury; and he would not have done differently if he had had a thousand chances. He had money and hope, and he pushed as boldly toward the setting sun as many an honest man, never doubting his future when he reached the goal of his wishes.

Nor was he mistaken. There was little risk of recognition now, under another name and in almost a different clime. For a dozen years he had his ups and downs; but upon the whole the ups predominated. On the verge of ruin several times, he came through all right, or dropped into something else. He grew stouter and aged somewhat. Wherever he went he made his mark, and men got accustomed to hearing Judge Schneider spoken of as a bold, pushing man, able to handle almost anything, and with mining interests scattered around that would certainly one day net him a fortune; though so far the receipts had been swallowed up by the expenses.

Some of his ventures proved unprofitable.

The Ground Hog claim, for instance.

From the time Mart Quigly had traced the blossom to the mother lode, and interested the judge, there had been a series of provoking disappointments, that had absorbed his profits elsewhere, and pinned him, for the greater part of the time to Red Earth, when he should have been down at Slaughter Bar, where money was really to be made.

If he had been at all superstitious, "the judge," as he was now universally called, might have supposed that there was in some way a curse hanging over his efforts; but for ten years he had only thought a few times, at long intervals, of the awful events that immediately preceded his coming to the West.

He hated to give up the Ground Hog. Other men around him were succeeding; and he had already sunk a mint of money in the shaft, that had been sunk to what any one but a miner would call a dangerous depth.

Dangerous or not, it had so far proved unprofitable, and as the work was done with an eye rather to development than permanency, it was barely possible that some little mischance might start a catastrophe. Some people rather expected one; but the miners took their chances, and from all accounts Judge Schneider scarcely cared. It is certain that he never, when away, as he frequently was, shivered lest, on his return, he might find the Ground Hog caved in, with a dozen men crushed in the tunnel. If Mart Quigly was one of them it might be a relief—yet Quigly was a man whom he more than half intended to use, especially if the Ground Hog proved a failure. He owned him body and soul so long as Quigly did not turn in despair and rend him.

The judge had his head-quarters at the hotel of the place—the Seven Angels. He paid high but had things fixed to suit himself. His room was in the most public part of the building and there was a glass window in the door so that all passers-by could see directly in, though his bed and table being to one side, there was little visible except a small iron safe that stood directly opposite to the window.

It was a cunningly devised plan, this, to keep the safe constantly in view of everybody—better than if he had hidden it ever so much. It made an impression; and then there was little chance to tamper with it; unless a man had the secret of the combination it would take an hour or two with good tools to go through lock or door. Even in his absence he felt little if any uneasiness. There was a man or two paid to look specially after his interests, and the landlord of the Angels, Michael Mitchell, was honest as could be.

Yet there was a secret in the safe that was worth more than the gold that it contained, and for years he had guarded it well, hoping that some day the time would come when he could use it.

The judge had been absent from Red Earth for some little time, and was returning in triumph. Slaughter Bar was thriving more than ever, and he had made up his mind to sink no more money in the Ground Hog, but to remove, bag and baggage to the place that seemed to offer a better and a wider field.

As the stage rattled along down the mountain roads or plunged into the recesses of the canyons he scarcely noted that the coach now and then swayed unpleasantly from side to side and advanced with an irregular and sometimes dangerous speed. He was busy with his own thoughts or he would have seen that the driver was "full" as a lord.

Yet no accident happened until just at the point of safety.

The coach came into Red Earth at a swinging gallop and the driver took the turn at the Seven Angels too suddenly.

There was a tremendous crash, the driver shot through the air, the stage landed on its side, the horses plunged viciously forward—and a scant hundred yards ahead was the narrow unrailed bridge that crossed the Taylor flume. As yet the judge was shaken though unhurt; but there was a strong chance of his life being beaten out in a moment or two, if the body of the stage, from which he could not escape, went crashing down upon the bed-rock of the flume.

Half a dozen men who saw the accident ran; but one of them was not too late.

He, though little more than a boy, flung himself straight upon the leaders.

There was a short, violent struggle.

Then one of the leaders reared and fell; the other followed him; the wheelers were mixed in the struggling mass; and under all was the young man. Very likely did it seem that he had given his life to save that of the judge, who, now that the stage lay motionless, sprung out of a window; staggering but unharmed.

By this time a dozen hands were on the horses, which were cut loose, pushed aside, forgotten, as they drew out the youth and carried him into the Angels.

There was blood on the lad's face: he was bruised, and motionless; the question was, how badly was he hurt.

"Reckon 'e's passed in 'is chips," said Mart Quigly, touching the judge lightly on the arm. "Lucky fur you that 'e was haround, thought."

"Yes, indeed! But, maybe the youngster is not dead yet! It would be a pity for such a lad of nerve to go under that way. Look! I believe he's coming around."

Under the ministrations of Dr. Dubbs, who happened to be on the spot, the young man did seem to be reviving. He gave a long breath, gasped and finally looked up. The blood had been washed off of his face, though it still welled through the cut on his forehead, and his countenance lay under the gaze of the judge, white and clear-cut.

It was just as well that all eyes were on the young man, and none on the judge, for the latter suddenly started back and passed his hand across his brow.

No wonder!

He had seen a counterpart of that face before, with just such a wound on the forehead! Line for line it was the face of the man who had dropped from the blow of his spade, in the moonlight by the Missouri years ago.

He could not help himself. Of course it was only an accidental resemblance; but he turned and staggered away. Even he was moved by the shock.

In a few minutes Quigly came out, his face wearing a cheerful look.

He found the judge standing with his hands in his pocket, gazing at vacancy.

"Didn't think hay little blood 'ud turn yer stomjack, judge, heaven bif hit wur spilt fur yer hown salvation. 'E's hay chipper hand, sassy 'as hay two-year-hold colt bin hay hoats field."

"Glad to hear it, then. I did feel a bit streaked when I thought but for him I might have been lying there with a worse hole in my head. I'll see what I can do for him, for, from his looks I think he's down on his luck. Who is he? Did he say?"

"Say! Blast my heyes, but that's ther funniest part hof hit. 'E didn't say nary hay word, fur 'e's dumb has ha hoyster."

"Dumb!"

The judge ejaculated but the one word.

Dumb—and that face!

At that moment the words of Clarice, carelessly heard, and since then forgotten, came back to him.

He turned abruptly away, and as he strode along he muttered to himself:

"By all the fiends, it is Clinton Bride's son!"

CHAPTER V.

A GRATEFUL FIEND.

JUDGE SCHNEIDER, after the revelation of Mart Quigly, was for a few moments anything but the cool, calculating villain.

What did this young fellow want here, at Red Earth? Could it be possible that he knew anything of the past and was on the trail for vengeance? Or was it by some miserably unlucky chance that he had drifted thither?

And in any case, what was to be done about it?

Over a dozen years added to the life of this man had made him different, not only in name, but nature. He was not so ready with his weapons as he once was, and he had not the yearning that he used to have to know the worst and have it over.

For that reason he did not see his way as clearly as he once would have done. It might be that he would have to be removed; but on the contrary, was there not some other way out of the trouble? If he was only a wandering waif, and as the judge intended to leave Red Earth for good and all, he might be dropped without trouble; or even sent away with a kindly remembrance of the man who had been grateful to him for the saving of his life.

So Schneider pulled himself together by an effort of the will, and after a hasty call at Hoodlum Hall, where he interviewed one of his men, who was generally to be found there, out of working hours, he got back to the Seven Angels, where he found the crowd dispersed, the doctor gone, and the young man, or youth—it was hard to tell which to call him—but little the worse for his late adventure.

The judge held out his hand, which was taken frankly and without the sign of diffidence or suspicion.

Then, over his shoulder, the man of mines spoke to Michael Mitchell, the landlord:

"Quigly tells me the poor fellow is dumb. Is it so, or was it only the result of the shock?"

"Dumb he is, dumb as a clam; but if you pick him up for deaf you'll be pretty badly sold, for he can hear for three."

It was a strange freak of nature, this, such as the judge had never before met with, and he turned curiously to the young man, who had drawn out a little slate and a pencil, while he looked eagerly at the man he had served.

"Who are you, my friend? and how do you happen to be here?" asked the judge.

The white fingers scribbled furiously for a little, and then the slate was held up.

"Clinton Bride," it said. "Looking around; perhaps will locate; perhaps go East."

"A thousand times I am thankful to you for your aid, that came when it was most needed. If you want me or my purse, command either, or both. If I can help you in any way don't be backward about naming it. My name is Schneider—Howard Schneider, and I'm in a position to help you right along if you need me."

The fingers rattled along again.

"Thank you: but I don't. While I have life and strength I help myself."

"A very good plan," answered the judge laughing, "but I'd like to show my gratitude in some way. What are you driving at, or what do you want to drive at?"

"Seeing the country," answered the pencil. "You would have done as much, or more, for me; say no more about it. If they fence the country in I'll come to you first to help me over the palings."

The method was tiresome, and the young man seemed careless whether or no the conversation was continued. With renewed offers of assistance the judge turned away.

He did not have a doubt now, for the name had told him to a certainty who the young man was. How true the balance of his story was remained a question that the judge proposed to ponder at his leisure. At first glance it seemed impossible that the youth could have any suspicions in regard to him, when all the sleuth-hounds of the law that no doubt had been bent upon the search for his track, a dozen years before, had failed.

Yet the judge had a nervous fear of what might be coming, and he sought his own room in deep thought, and flung himself upon the bed, his hands thrown back under his head, his eyes fixed upon the safe against the opposite wall.

"Queer sort of start, this," he thought to himself. "Clinton Bride's son wandering here alone, and, as I suspect, in poverty. By heavens, the wretch must be poor. My speculation, that only netted me a few thousands, made a beggar out of him. That infernal fire! There was wealth left behind that would have made half a million and the flames covered it up or destroyed it."

"Yet it must be there. Curses on it, there is a bigger bonanza in those vaults, than any I have struck in this land of gold. I've tried more than once to get possession of the place, but the idiot or knave—I swear I don't know which he was—has it tied up too tightly for even the thievish lawyers to get through to it. A shovel and pick applied in the right spot would open a chimney that would beat California for richness."

"And then, yonder safe. There's a little secret there that would make this dumb boy a man of note, without a doubt. With them and Quigly he could make a stir in the world. If he only knew—and, by heavens, who is to say that he don't know?"

Impelled by the thought the judge sprang from his bed, threw down the curtain that was rolled up above the window, and approached the safe, at which he looked sharply before proceeding to open the door.

He looked over the contents casually.

Nothing was missing.

Then he picked out a package of papers, tied with red tape, and beginning to be soiled and creased with much carrying.

He looked at them thoughtfully—and then gave a start.

He knew all the knots that he tied, and this one had never been made by his fingers.

He turned the papers up and down, over and over; and still there was the mute witness, staring him in the face.

Then with nervous haste he opened the package.

There was nothing missing; but there was no longer a doubt but that the papers had been tampered with!

Some one had mastered their contents and then returned them—forgetting, however, the order in which they had been placed.

To the judge, one conclusion only seemed certain. Within the last week the work had been done; and within the last week the dumb child of Clinton Bride had made his appearance at Red Earth. Now, since he possibly, and, indeed, probably, knew the secrets of the safe, what did he intend to do?

"He is going to lay for me," said the judge grimly, and in a half audible tone.

"He was afraid to take them outright while I lived; and he was right. He has nerve, and, perhaps, skill; it is a question of who will strike first. Beware, young man. If you once follow me, it is to death!"

He put the package back, closed the safe and arose, with compressed lips and a face that was slightly paler than it had been. In these few moments he had made up his mind, and all that he wanted was opportunity.

That he was in the habit of making.

In the evening he saw Quigly again and had some little talk.

The next day was Sunday, and Red Earth was full. Every one had quit work for the day, and every saloon, from the Star of Empire to Hoodlum Hall, was crowded.

Through this concourse of people the judge moved, a man of note, with a word for everybody; and all the time he had a consciousness of being followed. When he went toward the Seven Angels he saw the young Clinton Bride approaching in the distance.

"Ah, I have you playing around the bait; look out for the hook, young man. It is there!"

He went in and took from the safe the package of papers, which he thrust into his breast pocket. Then he came out and lounged carelessly around the piazza, waiting for a call to supper. When he was certain that Bride's eyes were on him, by careful accident he disclosed a bit of red tape. That was his "bait."

Night came on. When he had the chance he slipped away. His revolvers were handy, and he made the best of his way toward the Ground Hog shaft, which he had reason to know was utterly deserted.

His senses were all on the alert, for he did not know how soon a shot might strike him. Without seeming to do it, his eyes continually explored the shadows around him. He saw a flitting form in his rear, and occasionally heard the sounds of softly falling footsteps. The spy behind understood his business reasonably well.

Without hesitation, the judge entered the Ground Hog shaft, which began with an adit and then pitched downward. There had been a good deal of money spent there, and about all that was to be shown for it was a very long hole.

"Lucky that Quigly himself had decided at last that the Ground Hog was no good, besides being most infernal dangerous. There won't be very much of a howl in the morning when it is found that the work has come to an end."

While he thus communed with his own thoughts, the judge lighted a small lantern. He scarcely turned up the wick at all; but he had an object in having this feeble glimmer of light.

He was luring on the spy; and then he wanted no mistake made as to the road, either by himself or the other, whom he now felt certain would follow him—to the death, perhaps. He struck deeper into the shaft, carrying in one hand the lantern, in the other an ax.

After a little, the judge suddenly deflected to the left and immediately increased his pace. When he had gone some little distance the tunnel turned again to the right.

Following on for some little distance further he placed the lantern down and then ran on with still fleetest steps, until he found himself back once more in the tunnel from which he had diverged, when he again turned to the right.

Now he went cautiously, feeling his way along, at last pausing to listen. He was near the spot where he had entered the side drift. No sound was audible, but he proceeded with more and more caution, advancing on his hands and knees until he reached the opening through which he was certain the youth had followed.

At some little distance he could see the faint reflection of the light of his lantern. Between it and him there crouched the dark figure of a watcher, who was evidently puzzled what to do.

The judge noted his position and nodded. He was satisfied that he had the son of Clinton Bride fairly under the trap; what remained now to do was to spring it, and that he only too well knew how, though he had to take his risks in the darkness.

He sprang up and gave three blows like lightning at a single timber.

Then he sprang backward.

There was a tearing, rending sound, and then the noise of a thundering crash, as the wall of rocks above and on either side seemed to close in, and then the judge was running backward toward the mouth of the adit.

That spy would scarcely come peeking and peering around him again, since he lay under tons and tons of rock, buried to all eternity.

CHAPTER VI.

A WILLFUL WOMAN.

SEVERAL years elapsed, and the judge was more prosperous than ever. He seemed now to have pinned all his faith on Slaughter Bar, and had made some changes in his mode of life with the ease and success that always had distinguished him.

Slaughter Bar, however, was somewhat under a cloud. The Vigilantes had risen the week before and got in their work after the terse, vigorous fashion of such social gatherings. One man, taken red-handed in murder had been hung, and several expatriated, with a gentle reminder that certain destruction awaited them if they returned. After that Judge Schneider remarked that he guessed white men could live at the Bar again; and the remaining roughs, toughs and hard cases became sadder and quieter men.

So it seemed, at least, for since that evening there had not been a case of mortality in town, and the sports who filed through the saloons nominated their poison or staked their coin on the hazard of card or die in an orderly way that quite took away the breath of the staid citizens to see, though the remark of a customer to John Oaks, a quiet, responsible man, who helped keep a little store, was very much to the point:

"They hang a bad man and cleared out a few more, but they left worse behind, and the worst men of all were holding onto the rope. Things have quieted down just now, but they'll break loose—they'll break loose."

That seemed to be a general opinion. A little weeding would scarcely have a lasting effect. There might be a temporary cloud of depression, but that would lift, and the camp would once more justify the old name of Slaughter Bar.

There had been a change of late in the judge's household arrangements. He had put up a substantial and exceptionally roomy cabin, and then disappeared for a few weeks. When he returned he brought with him a tall, queenly-looking girl, whom he mentioned as his daughter, Nellie.

The Bar was not particularly surprised. He had been heard to speak vaguely of his family and certain reasons that had prevented his having them with him. He had no objections to the Bar guessing at what those reasons were; and if the majority of the people who thought at all on the subject decided that prosecution for some crime had been barred by lapse of time, he was now ready to leave the retirement he had previously courted.

Miss Nellie was a beauty, though, and those who at times had seen her eyes flash and her lips harden, knew that she had a will of her own. She did not take altogether kindly to the society of the Bar, though she had a nod and a good-morning for those she had met more than once, and as for her father—she held him at arm's length, so to speak, and went her own way more than he had deemed it possible a girl could do.

It was well toward evening one day, not long after the regenerating efforts of the Vigilantes already mentioned, and Miss Nellie sauntered slowly along the side of the trail. Slaughter Bar lay behind her, the long shadows were beginning to fall, and the place was lonesome, but she did not seem at all nervous. About her waist was a belt that carried a pair of revolvers which she knew how to use, and in an emergency she felt certain she could protect herself, when she came suddenly face to

face with a tall, broad-shouldered man with a dark, handsome face.

She saw his shadow before she heard his step, and glanced up without much interest or alarm. It was only when he made a side step toward her that her face flushed a little with indignation.

"Good-evening, Miss Nellie," said the intruder, doffing his hat with what might seem an excess of politeness. "I am afraid you do not recognize me; but I told you we should meet again. Haven't you a word of greeting for your humble servant?"

"You insult me," answered the young lady, sharply. "What greeting could I have for an unknown man, who comes in the dark with the step of a thief, or something worse?"

"Ah! I flattered myself that I might be remembered as your very devoted admirer. And I assure you I come with the most disinterested motives in the world; if you would but listen you might admit it."

He smiled softly. Then his lips remained parted, showing his teeth, white and sharp.

"Listen—listen? Yes, I do remember you. You asked me to listen to you once or twice before, when you thought you had the right to insult me. You shall not do it again. If I was a man I would answer you with a blow, as I am a woman, I will answer you with this."

Her hand dropped to her belt with a threatening gesture.

"Heigh-ho! I see you misunderstand me. It is true that I then wanted to plead my undying affection; now I want to speak only for your own interest. I have watched you longer than you think—at first from a financial motive, and afterward from a more sentimental one. I have also watched the judge, and I think I will have him cornered soon. Meantime, beware of him! You may be his daughter, and you may not. In any event, if you were in his way, he would wring your neck with as little compunction as he has wrung several others."

"That is enough, sir. I refuse to hear another word. Let me pass!"

"Oh, but you must hear. I am not certain whether he has brought you down here to kill you or to kiss you. In either event I want him to keep hands off! And I would sooner protect than avenge you. Suppose you give me the right to do both?"

He spoke as coolly as though the girl's eyes were not on him with cutting scorn. In fact he was wooing in what he conceived the only spirit that might have a chance to win, and he was willing to risk much.

"I can protect myself; and should I be called away, I shall need no vengeance."

"So you say; but when you have heard—"

"But I will not hear. For the last time, pass on!"

"Yes, but you will though. And as for your pop-guns, I'll take charge of them until the interview is ended."

Nellie thought she was quick with her weapons, but she had had no dealings with such a man as this, who was quicker than her thoughts. It was not this interview that had roused her to fury, but the remembrance of former persecutions. Had he hesitated she would have fired.

He did not hesitate. With a quick spring he closed in and snatched away the pistols from hand and belt, and then, bounding back, bowed low, a revolver in either hand.

Then his mocking laugh was checked in its midst, and the noise of a good, solid blow echoed on the evening air.

Under its force the man went down like lead, while in his place stood a handsome young fellow, with laughter in his eye, and yet respect in his bow.

"He is an outlaw—a thief. Shun his ways or he'll hurt you. No thanks. A stranger needs none when he only does his duty. Your way is there, take it while there's no danger."

Nevertheless she murmured her thanks while he picked up her revolvers and handed them to her.

"Not every stranger," she added, "would have taken the risks of attacking a man who held weapons ready. You have done me a favor that I shall not forget, and if you come to the Bar, as I suspect you intend to, I may be able to return it. Thank you again and good-night. Beware of that man, though, when he comes to his senses."

She turned and walked away, the voice of the young man following her in a cheery, yet soft, "Good-night."

Presently the man on the ground came to his senses. It seemed to him that he had heard, as if in a dream, two voices—two men talking—and the one voice was familiar. He staggered to his feet and looked around, but he was alone, and not a thing on his person seemed to be touched.

Nevertheless he shook his head and ground his teeth.

"It sounded like the voice of Dan Sliter, and who else could have struck such a blow? It can be for no good that he goes to Slaughter Bar. By heavens! if he is there I'll take him out and slay him right before them all. It's kill or be killed, and it's time the men there know what kind of a clothes-pin they've got lying around their back door. I'll go down to-night."

Then he shook his hand toward the Bar, gave one more glance around and disappeared over the hill.

About nine o'clock that evening Judge Schneider, who had been poring over an array of figures, arose and buckled on his belt.

"I think, Nellie, I will go down to the Alhambra to-night. The dancing has begun again, and though the town has been regulated into something like shape, it needs looking after. If I don't get in until late, you needn't stay awake, and if McQuoid should happen to come around to talk over the Hair Pin, send him down to the saloon—I shall be there."

"So shall I," responded Miss Nellie, coolly. "If you are going down to the Alhambra I'll just hang onto an arm and go along."

"What nonsense is this? That is no place for you, and I wouldn't see you there for ten thousand."

"Pshaw! Put your pride in your pocket. If you don't want to act as my escort go on down, and I'll paddle my own canoe. You see these? I know how to use them too."

The young lady touched significantly the stocks of her revolvers that she had ready at her waist, and then looked up into the judge's face with charming impudence.

"I believe, on my soul, that that is half a threat. Why, my dear child, it is only for your own good. And if you must see the inside of the Alhambra wait until to-morrow night. They have a masked ball there then, and under my protection you can go to that, for a few moments, in safety, and no one be any the wiser."

"Thank you, but no masked ball do I care to see, for that is the time when they have pistols for six and men without limit for breakfast. It is every-night life at the Alhambra I want to see, and I'm going."

She spoke positively and the judge, who was in haste, seemed to see the folly of argument.

"In the fiend's name, then, come on. Mind that you take care of yourself and begin no nonsense, for I stand over something like a volcano here. It may only need your foolishness to start an eruption."

"Take care of yourself then, and don't worry about me. Here goes for my first ball at Slaughter Bar."

She clapped her hands together with a merry laugh, and bounded through the open door. She was having her own way, and it is needless to say that that way was not without a purpose.

CHAPTER VII.

AN INNOCENT ABROAD.

THIS same evening the stage had reached Slaughter Bar about sundown or a little later and as part of its moderate load had set down Harley Vernon in front of the Pilgrim's Pride.

Harley Vernon, by the way, was a young Englishman, with a well-knit frame, a fresh complexion, aquiline nose, clear gray eyes, sandy hair and mutton-chop whiskers. He had been long enough in America to understand that almost anything was possible there; and yet not long enough to altogether feel at home wherever he might drop down. He had courage, however; and money, and although he was alone, and had been thoroughly posted as to the nature of the city of refuge to which he had penetrated, he did not appear at all nervous.

The Pilgrim's Pride was the hotel of the place, and it was run on temperance principles, so that it was always quiet enough, and the man who stopped there upon his arrival was apt to have a favorable first impression of the town.

That was the case with Harley Vernon.

the cuisine of the *Pride* was all that could be desired, the landlord, Peter Van Vedder, was gravely attentive, and the Chinaman of all work was as docile as an almond-eyed Oriental could be; which was saying a good deal.

For these and other reasons Mr. Vernon began to think that possibly Slaughter Bar was not as bad as its reputation, and shortly after taking a hearty supper he lit a cigar and wandered forth, without even asking Van Vedder's counsel as to which were safe directions to follow.

He wandered around the camp, even making some little progress toward scaling the mountain side that was temptingly near. No one said a word to him and he said not a word to any one, though now and then he passed one or more of the denizens of the Bar.

As it grew later he turned his face once more toward the center of the camp; and led by the sound of music, he finally brought up in front of the Alhambra.

A glance through the open door satisfied him as to the nature of the place, and after a momentary hesitation, more to obtain an idea of how the land lay than from any prudential considerations, he finally went in.

Certainly everything seemed to be going on tranquilly enough.

At the end nearest to the door was the bar behind which stood Engine Jack, a tall, stoutly built young man, who, when not engaged dispensing his potables, leaned upon the plank top of his counter, watching the proceedings with an eagle eye.

At the further end of the bar was a sort of addition, not quite so high. There, on the raised platform, sat the two musicians, who scraped and picked out music in every sort of tune and time. Although their position was all right for the legitimate business of tune and dance, it was by no means healthy when the boys struck up a frolic; and in the wall, exactly behind the violinist's head, were the splashes of a couple of bullets.

The shooters had had him *lined*, and only had he saved himself by a sudden spring behind the bar, which was a regular fortification, with a rear means of exit for the non-combatants.

Along the sides of the room were ranged stout benches, firmly fixed to the wall, and at the further end, were several tables, that seemed to be fixtures in each corner, while through an open door a glimpse could be had of more. Card playing and its conveniences were the legitimate things at the Alhambra, and the tiger lurked in the rear room.

Just now, however, the tables were deserted. As Vernon entered, the music ceased, and the floor was full of men and women who were either strolling toward the bar, or toward the benches by the wall.

There was nothing about the scene that was repulsive to any one accustomed to the civilization of the West. When Vernon stepped up to the bar, two or three men nodded to him in a neighborly sort of way, as though they did not wish to intrude, yet wanted to make him feel at home. No one asked him to drink, or acted as though they wanted him to "set them up," and having poured down a sample of the goods that Engine Jack retailed, he made his way carelessly across the room, without having any particular objective point, though his intention was to get as far as possible from the bar.

He gave something of a start as he neared the further door.

Sitting behind one of the vacant tables, gazing around her with a pleasant, but curious air, was a handsome-faced young girl, a perfect lily among the full-blown roses. Near her stood a tall, dark-faced man of forty; the most carefully dressed man in the room, though he would scarcely have passed muster at the New York Academy of Music.

His arms were folded, and he was talking to a man who was still taller, with broad-stooped shoulders, and an unmistakable Scotch face.

In the opposite corner of the room there was a table altogether empty, and as Vernon glanced about him, he saw that four or five men were coming forward, looking at the two tables; and that the one, behind which the girl was sitting, was rather the nearest.

Carelessly, and without any premeditation, the Englishman slipped into a chair, and half leaning, with his elbow upon the table, surveyed the room with a look of pleased amusement.

The movement gave no offense, for the ap-

proaching four simply turned to the other table, leaving Harley Vernon almost *tete-tete* with the young lady who had attracted his attention.

He meant to speak to her, if opportunity offered, but he was in no hurry, since he was certain that he must proceed cautiously, if he wanted to avoid giving offense. The grateful look that he thought he detected, for his successful maneuver was encouraging; but he had true English prudence, and waited. When the music struck up again, and the floor was filled with dancers, some of whom were graceful, but all of whom were energetic, he was satisfied that he had not been mistaken. This young lady was certainly not a regular *habitué* of the place.

The two men that had been standing near moved a step or two aside and sunk down upon the bench by the wall, continuing their conversation, which, from the word or two Vernon had caught, was about mines and mining, and some particular lode or vein in which they had an interest. From time to time the girl gave a glance at them. But for the most part her gaze rested upon the whirling couples on the floor.

Finally, as Vernon changed his position slightly, his eyes met hers fixed fully upon him.

She did not seem particularly confused, though she smiled and flushed a little as Vernon, by instinct, nodded.

"A looker on in Vienna, like myself, I see?" he said, in a low, pleasant tone. "And Slaughter Bar does not seem to be half as bad as its reputation."

"Thank you, in the name of our town," she responded, without a particle of hesitation. "But Slaughter Bar is under a momentary eclipse, which will last as long as the average memory of these men, or until some one or something stirs them up. The Vigilantes were about last week, and the lambs can hear the echoes of the dead march at the funerals. You have struck the camp a week too late, or a week too early to see it on its true shape. Yet, if you are fortunate, something may happen. Don't be despondent. There are some men here."

"Oh, I assure you, I have no desire to see it at its worst, and it seems to me that I could not have been more fortunate than I have been. I want to spend a week or so in this camp, and I assure you I don't care how mild and amiable its denizens are during that time."

"A sensible conclusion—or at least, a profitable one. Slaughter Bar would hardly appreciate such prudence on the part of its would-be citizens, however. And if you remain long enough, I think I can guarantee you the sight of a general shaking up. I'd advise you to go 'heeled,' anyhow."

"Heeled? That, I suppose, is the technical expression for what, in more moderate climates, would be called a walking arsenal. Thank you, but the labor is too much for the possible benefit. So far I have got along with nature's weapons; and being fairly well accustomed to their use, I hope they will see me through. I see that you follow the customs of the camp."

"Yes, and find my account in it. There are men here who are reckless enough for anything, yet would think twice before they would run the risk of being taken into camp by a girl. And they know I'd shoot, and can shoot, and have shot; and that's the whole of it."

Harley Vernon looked at this frank spoken young woman with some amusement. He could not quite understand who she might be; and her reticence and want of curiosity piqued him. Probably he would have asked some direct question had it not been for a little incident that occurred, which seemed likely to disturb the harmony of the evening.

In front of the bar a stout, low-browed man had planted himself, with his elbows resting on the counter, but his hands projecting in front of him, each grasping a six-shooter. He had been talking in a lower tone, and his voice had been drowned by the music, and the measured tread of the dancers; but now there was a pause, and his words cut the air, clear and distinct.

"Oh, I'm a cross-eyed man, I am, with a hump on my back an' three lead teeth, but I tell you I'm solid on the bed rock, an' don't you furgit it. Ef I'd been hyer it's a hull band-wagon an' a twenty-horse team ag'in' one leetle burro thgt they wouldn't 'a' hung Circus Pete, er got the dead medicine on the Hard Pan crowd. An' ef ary man that held ther

rope on Pete wants ter shake me up, I'm hyer now. You hear me, eh?"

The glimpse of the millennium was over; and Slaughter Bar once more went round on wheels.

CHAPTER VIII.

THREE BAD MEN FROM BITTER CREEK.

HARLEY VERNON was rather inclined to smile at the howled defiance of the man who was talking in the interest of the defunct Circus Pete; but a glance showed him that the people of the Bar took a serious view of it. There was a fluttering about the eyes of even Miss Nellie; and Vernon heard Judge Schneider exclaim to his companion, who was the McQuoid of whom he had spoken:

"Great guns! There's Buck Brandon, from over the range! Keep an eye on him. There'll be murder done for sure, for Circus Pete was his pard; and there are a dozen men here who will back him. Yet, if he keeps that up, I must take up his challenge."

Then he suddenly remembered his daughter, and gave a hasty glance toward her.

She was speaking in a low tone to a young man who, to him was an utter stranger.

He raised his finger warningly.

"This is no place for you, Nellie. There will be trouble here within the next five minutes, and then even you will be in danger. This young man seems to be one who can be trusted; and if he would do us both a favor he will escort you home."

Vernon arose and bowed.

"My name is Harley Vernon, and I am a stranger here. I shall only be too happy to be of service to the young lady; though at the same time I scarcely care to withdraw at the moment that I have a chance to obtain an insight into your customs. Still, command me."

Was it only fancy?

As Judge Schneider heard the name of Harley Vernon a strange look seemed to come into his face, that was followed, for a moment, by a ghastly pallor. Then he bowed coldly.

"You will do as well as a better man. Were it possible for me to leave, I assure you that I would not trust you with the service. I am Judge Schneider, late of the lynch court, and this is my daughter. Now, if it is not too late, go. You can return. You will find a way out through and beyond that door."

He pointed to the further room as he spoke and without demur Nellie rose up.

"As we are non-combatants, we've no business here anyhow. Come, Mr. Vernon, I press you into my service."

The young Englishman had nothing to do but to follow.

In fact, he did not feel very much like hesitating. He heard angry voices sounding through the room, and a number of the spectators were beginning to fall back in good order.

Back through the door they went, as Judge Schneider advanced toward the spot where Buck Brandon had planted himself; but once in the smaller room Miss Nellie coolly halted and turned.

"That will do to throw the old gentleman off the scent; but I'm not going home now—not for a cent. I didn't want to spoil his nerve by having him think I was here and near; but I'm going to see this thing out. And, Mr. Vernon, for all your love of nature's weapons, I'd advise you to take this, and keep it in your pocket against the time of need."

She placed her hand on one of the little, gold-mounted revolvers in her belt.

Vernon smiled:

"Thank you; but, though I've not a paraphernalia of arms, I am not altogether unprovided for a tight place. The fists first, but afterward I can reach back and start a young earthquake."

The fact was that Vernon, with foreign modesty, preferred to keep his weapons out of sight; but was not the sort of a man to leave an emergency unprovided for. Seeing that such was the case, Nellie dropped her hand from the offered weapon, and peered out through the door.

Buck Brandon's defiance had had the effect that the judge had feared. While it awakened up the Vigilantes and their friends, it also brought to the surface all that had been and was favorable to the Hard Pan crowd. The feminine element, or the greater portion of it, scurried away, while the men fell apart with angry words, and with hands on hips. All that was needed was some one to start the

ball, and Slaughter Bar would see another, and a desperate struggle.

Nearly every one expected it to come, and it was an open question whether the most of them did not want it. A week of quiet was more than the average citizen could stand.

"Oh, I know what I'm sayin'!" shouted Buck Brandon, from his place in front of the bar, as he saw Judge Schneider advancing. "Here's the sand what backs it all up every time. I'm a chief, an' don't you furgit it. I'm the bad man from Bitter Creek, hot on the shute. Waugh!"

The end of the defiance was a coarse, long-drawn howl.

And then, ludicrous, yet terrible coincidence, an answer came, almost like an echo—and like a double echo at that.

"Waugh!!!"

Through an open window on either side of the room, a man sprang in.

Each had a revolver in either hand, and each, as he struck the floor, exclaimed:

"I'm Circus Pete the shuter, an' a bad man from Bitter Creek! Ef yer don't believe I'm a butcher, smell ov me boots!"

A second later a natty young man, dressed in a black velvet suit, well spangled with gold buttons, and a broad brimmed, white sombrero, pushed between Harley Vernon and Miss Nellie.

The girl started. She recognized, on the instant the young man who had come to her aid a few hours before. To tell the truth she had rather expected to see him here.

He did not appear to notice her, for he resolutely made his way into the dance-room, when, leaping upon one of the tables, with folded arms, he shouted in a voice distinctly heard above the confusion.

"I'm Lightning Dick of Shasta, and a chief on wheels. I spent six days with the bad men of Bodie, and I'm hyer alive. Cards, sixes er this—I'll take ther chances with any man ter run the town."

From his belt he drew a shining, twelve inch blade and with a dexterous twirl cast it upward into a beam that stretched from wall to wall, a few inches above his head.

"You hear it?" he added. "That's my horn sounding!"

"An' that's Engine Jack's bell what's ring in?" yelled a voice from the other end of the room, though some of the words were almost drowned by the sharp crack of a pistol. For the first time in the history of the Bar the proprietor of the Alhambra seemed to have started the ball by firing the opening shot.

And it was a very fair offer, too; more than one expecting to see a corpse drop from the table.

Nothing of the kind.

The movements of the man in black velvet never lost their grace. His body had writhed aside, though at the instant his hand was outstretched, holding his sombrero where his head had been.

"Hold on! I didn't fire!" shouted Engine Jack, but no one seemed to notice. Their eyes were elsewhere. Something seemed to hit the hat a light tap, though the thud of a bullet entering wood was heard. Then the handsome little sport held his sombrero up, circling it round and round his finger, which protruded through the hole made by Engine Jack's bullet.

"That's for fun!" he cried, with a shrill laugh. "Now for business!"

He threw his hat on his head, whipped out two revolvers, bounded from the table, and advanced down the center of the room a few paces, directly facing Buck Brandon, who had suddenly become quiet under this new development.

The three, who claimed to be bad men from Bitter Creek, and the sport who had spent nearly a week at Bodie, were facing each other, with hands down, but weapons drawn, while the people of the Slaughter Bar, amused and amazed, stood gazing at the rival claimants.

It was nothing to have rival chiefs in town; but, after having hung one, Circus Pete, it was an undue crowding of the mourners that two more should appear within the week.

"Hold on!" shouted the hoarse voice of Brandon. "Ef thar's three more chiefs in the ring I cave. Settle it atween yerselves; an' I'll back the best man."

At that the two bad men from Bitter Creek turned toward their rival from Bodie, just in time to hear his laughing treble:

"Oh, no you don't, judge; I've an eye in the back of my head and shoot straight over my shoulder."

And, flinging up one arm around his neck he held a revolver pointed straight at judge Schneider, who was silently creeping toward him with a naked knife in his hand.

CHAPTER IX.

A PAIR OF JUGGLERS.

AT sight of the pistol that menaced him Judge Schneider halted as though the bullet had already found his brain.

Most marvelous did it seem to him, for he had stepped as silently as an Indian, and occupied as they were with the men that were blowing their own bugles, he had not believed that a soul in the room had seen him draw the knife. Yet, taken he was, in the very act, as all Slaughter Bar could see, though no one save himself could judge of his intentions.

And, what seemed most provoking of all, was that Lightning Dick never even turned to face him; but a low chuckle sounded from his lips, while his eyes wandered from the one Circus Pete to the other, keeping them both covered with his remarkably keen optics.

Though his face was still white enough, and his hand trembled somewhat with eagerness, the judge did not seem at all disconcerted.

Ten feet, perhaps, separated them, and he hesitated just an instant, measuring the distance, debating whether it was possible for him to clear it with a bound.

He didn't believe any such nonsense as that the handsome young Sport had an eye in the back of his head, though he was sure that if his finger tightened on the trigger it would be certain death.

It might do so if he rushed forward. Another plan seemed decidedly better. He silently changed the knife into his left hand, and dropped his right upon the revolver at his belt, at the same time stepping noiselessly to one side, to be out of range.

But the barrel in the hands of the Lightning Sport followed him as he went, and he heard again the mocking laugh of the man in black velvet.

"Ha, ha, judge! None of that! I've got you covered and I mean to keep you so till I get you where I want you. Hands up, and come round in front, so I can have you all in a bunch! Then go for me if you choose!"

The judge knew as well as any one when he was in a tight place. He had hopes, indeed, that Engine Jack would set his bell to ringing again; but that worthy held his hand at a growled caution that Buck Brandon threw at him. And then, it appeared that his first movement had been made so suddenly that it was rather the result of surprise than fixed purpose; and now, he was willing to keep out of sight and wait for the result of the very pretty little affair that seemed to be on the carpet.

While this bit of by-play was being enacted, there were two others who looked as though they did not exactly understand the place they had in the game. And if they were puzzled so were the men of the Bar, for if anything was certain it was that neither of the two was Circus Pete; and why then should either of them have assumed the name of the lately deceased, especially in that camp where he was so well known? The question became doubly pertinent when two such men turned up at the same time.

As for the men, themselves, they were not so dissimilar in appearance. Slaughter Bar would have had to toss up to make a choice between them; and it seemed possible that they would have to do something of the kind to tell themselves apart. It was pretty certain that they had never chanced to meet before, and that their mutual appearance had been also a mutual surprise, and had disarranged their plans. No chance would they have to prove their chieftainship with the citizens of Slaughter Bar until they had settled the little matter of precedence between themselves.

For that reason they probably did not take so much stock in what was going on in the back part of the room. Their first business was with each other.

So, at length, one of them spoke:

"I think I heerd some one shoutin' 'Circus Pete.' That's my name, an' I ain't ashamed ov ther handle. I don't keer what ther fodder is, when yer call me I'm up to ther rack, every time."

He looked defiantly at the rival claimant to the name, shaking his pistols as though they were playthings.

Instead of accepting the challenge the other deliberately thrust his weapons into his belt and strode forward nearer to the chandelier, with a good humored grin on his face.

"Well, of all the dog-goned liars you beat 'em all, sport! Ef you kin handle a steel thing with a hole in it ez well ez you kin rattle yer red rag I'll knock right under, an' shake ther town. Why, blame my cats—I'm Circus Pete, myself, king ov keerds, duke ov der-ringers, an' boss ov the bowie, ter say nothin' about bein' ther best man with ther fives on this side ov ther mount'ings."

"Ef that's ther kind ov a rooster you be, all I've got ter say is *prove it!* I'm hyer, ready ter meet ary galoot, at ary game, with any tool ever invented, from fives to sixes, an' thar's me old side-pardner, Buck Brandon, jist willin' ter back me fur all he's worth."

"Your side-pardner? Not much—he's mine. Why, when Charley Cole give him his hotel, down at Ariavaca an' he lost it on the turn, an' Charley climbed him fur sayin' it war a spring-box and a fifty-three deck, whar would he 'a' bin ef it hedn't bin fur Circus Pete?"

"Prezactly, me jumpin' buck; an' that war me!"

"When a white man sez a thing, he puts up er shuts up when some one sez, 'Back it.'"

"Now ye'r gittin' near whar I live," gleefully retorted the other. "Hyar's ther slugs that sez it. Oh, I ain't no poor, lean shote thet hezn't ther grease to keep my tongue a-waggin'. Put up yer spon; hyar's mine. Name yer pile."

He slapped his pocket sharply, and the strokes were answered by the musical jingle of coin.

"Up they are byar, too! Fifty dollars will I stake that I kin prove ye'r a liar, an' then I'm open to another bet, ef that don't bu'st yer all up."

"Prove it, if ye kin; but ef Slaughter Bar don't see yer hackles drop call me a second-handed Dutchman an' a broken-legged loon. Hyar's Buck, now; leave it ter him."

"Not much! He's a good man ter tie to in a blizzard, but, dog-gone him, he'd sell his grandmother's coffin fur a sluice-box ef ther war a joke er a dollar in it. He might be a-standin' in with yer. How's this, eh? Do those look like Circus Pete?"

From his pocket the speaker drew out half a dozen golden eagles and tossed them up in the air, with toss after toss keeping them there in a golden stream. Such a specimen of dextrous juggling the people of the Bar had never hitherto seen.

"Hyar, rocks, take these! You do it like the old man, good enough."

Buck Brandon, at the bar, was watching with rather an amazed expression. As he spoke he launched a pair of tumblers, one after the other, full at the juggler's head.

Had either struck, the force of the missile was enough to have felled him to the floor; but, still keeping the coins going with his right hand, with his left this claimant of the dead man's name caught the tumblers one after the other, and, tossing them into the air, they went up and down, round and round, as part of the shimmering circle.

Slaughter Bar was convinced. If there had been a call for hands up to decide the bet, they would have shown their paws in a moment.

All the same they would have shown too soon.

The other Circus Pete gave a snort of surprise, and then his hand came out of his pocket with as many eagles as his *vis-a-vis* had going.

Up into the air they went with just as even a motion.

"Now, pard, sling in yer tumblers," he exclaimed, and caught the two that were slung at him as dexterously as the others had been taken!

The first juggler was not done yet, however. With skillful manipulation he flung his coin and glasses so that the eagles dropped into the tumblers, and for an instant he played the two in his left hand, while with his right he drew out one of his revolvers and his heavy bowie and cast them, too, into the air.

But that movement was also imitated, and more than one person shuddered as they saw the keen, glittering blades playing in the air, mixed in with the shower of other articles.

There was still more to come.

"Change!" shouted one Circus Pete, and as he

gave the word he tossed a tumbler to the other, who caught the glass, coin and all, and at the same time tossed his own back, and each in perfect time caught and kept up the missiles of the other for a moment. Then came the cry of "change!" and each man took again his own.

The first Circus Pete shook his head. So far there seemed little to choose between them. It was time to try something else.

By a dexterous twist of the wrist he shook the coin out of the tumblers, adding them to the stream that was circling in the air.

His double imitated the movement.

Then he suddenly seized his revolver by the stock, six reports were heard—mingled with six other reports—and, tossing the now empty revolver up, he grasped the tumblers one in each hand. Into them fell revolver and bowie, and he and his rival, who had exactly reproduced his feat, bowed low at the thunders of applause—for Slaughter Bar was frank enough to acknowledge the merits of a stranger, even if he laid claim to the title of chief.

As for their gold coins, each one had been struck fairly, while in the air, by a bullet from the revolver of the other juggler. A more costly exhibition of skill had never been given that audience, since several hundred dollars had totally disappeared, and that, too, without any practical benefit to the performers, since the question was still unsettled as to which had the best right to the name of Circus Pete.

In the midst of the excitement there was one young gentleman who made himself heard. It was Lightning Dick, from Shasta.

"They do that well," he said, "but hyer's a little trick that ain't no slouch either, and I've got coin to back it that they can't put a cap on. You hear me, say?"

Everybody was ready for more wonders. He had attention in a minute.

"You see that knife sticking in that wall up yonder, eh?"

It was his own bowie, still hanging where he had placed it. There was a chorus of affirmatives as he jerked his hand backward over his shoulder without once looking around.

"Wot ov it?" asked Buck Brandon, hoarsely.

"This."

The handsome sport threw his hand up like lightning and fired right over his shoulder without appearing to take the slightest aim.

"If you don't find the halves of my bullet on each side of my blade I'll set 'em up for the house."

Up on the table sprung the man nearest to the spot, and looked for the result of the shot.

Not long in waiting did he keep the crowd. Turning, he dashed his ragged-looking old hat upon the table, and planted both heels upon it to stay, while he shouted:

"Ding blast my top-knot ef they ain't thar jest ez he sez, ez sure ez my name's Old Daddy Bender, ov Black Dam. Boy or man I never see'd nothing like it, an' I'll bet a hundred foot on ther Comstock to a yard on Peter Bar he can't—"

Daddy Bender broke off into a sudden howl and evacuated the table so rapidly that he went sprawling on the floor. He had heard the sound of another shot and the vicious ping of a bullet an inch or two from his face. Lightning Dick had fired over his shoulder once more, and again the bullet was deftly halved on the knife-blade.

"And now," continued the handsome sport, "there's no discount on the shooting, but it ain't so certain what can be done with the pasteboards. If these Circus Petes mean sport, hyer's the sharp that can take their stamps at poker—straight or draw."

"That's whar I live!" growled the two in a breath, and without more ado the three called up the house to saturate, and then began the great championship game that was so long renowned in the annals of Slaughter Bar.

CHAPTER X.

HEAVY HANDS.

FROM the opening overture the Bar had a right to expect something more than ordinary—and the bar had it. Three more fearless men than these certainly never sat down to wrestle over a game of draw, and curiosity to know who they were was merged, or rather lost, in the desire to know how the game was to terminate.

With a fresh pack of cards the three settled themselves at one of the tables already mentioned. Then Lightning Dick skillfully wove

the cards in from the ends, thoroughly mixing them with three or four deft movements.

"Cut for deal. Ace or highest wins, and fours beat a straight flush."

"That's my game," answered the one Circus Pete.

"Straights beat two pair an' cave under three ov a kind," put in the other.

Then three men reached forward, and each lifting half a dozen cards, disclosed the under one.

Each man held up a deuce.

"My deal," said Circus Pete No. 2, "I'm ther oldest man. Ante up!"

"Take it along," responded Lightning Dick, tossing the cards over. "Life's too short to waste. Take all night to get to work."

In perfect silence the dealer took the cards.

"Edge!" called Lightning Dick.

"Blind!" responded the next, pushing five dollars into the pool.

"Straddle." And the next planked down a ten.

"See you," challenged the handsome sport, throwing in his ten.

"Good," put in the blind man, with a five. Then they lifted their hands.

"What do yer all want?" asked the dealer.

"Two."

"Three."

"And I'll take a little pair ter fill my hand up."

Then the serious work began. It was a battle royal, in which each was for himself, and did not need any one to tell him how to manage his hand.

Slowly the size of the pool increased, and very confident did the betters seem, though they held their cards in such a way that no one could possibly see the size of their hands, despite prying eyes and curious glances. The display of reckless betting was not as lurid as the bystanders had hoped for, but the scientific way they felt each other's strength was something to see and dream over.

Finally the dealer rose right at the other two.

"Hyar!" he exclaimed, as he tossed a buckskin on the table. "Fill up ther pot ez full ez yer want to, but thar's my bottom dollar; an' when you frisky galoots shows up, then Circus Pete wants a sight fur his money. Thar's ten ounces ov dust thar, an' you kin weigh it when yer walk up to ther captain's office ter settle."

"I'll call right there on that. It's near enough to my pile to make a good limit. Hyer's the hand that takes the money."

"You two lay over my pile a leetle, but count me in fur all I'm wuth. Hyar's my wallet. Fair show now, an' ther man thet calls his hand fur more er less than its wuth, ther rest plug him."

"That's ther size ov it. All together. Lay ther hull five keards down, face up, an' let ther crowd jedge who's ther best man."

"Right to a charm!" asserted Lightning Dick, for the first time spreading out his hand.

Then the three threw their cards down in front of them, faces up; and each man put down four aces and a tray!

For an instant an acute ear could have noticed if a pin had dropped, though nothing was heard but the suppressed breathing of principals and spectators.

Then a universal shout arose as the men of Slaughter Bar recognized the immensity of the fraud that the rival chiefs had engineered successfully through before their very eyes.

Yet it was no laughing matter, either.

Three pairs of eyes swept sharply around the table, and then there was a simultaneous movement as though three pairs of hands were operated by the same hidden mechanism.

Up to their feet they started and leaned forward, a revolver in either hand, and the six sharp clicks blended into one as the half-dozen hammers went back.

There they stood, two barrels almost touching every breast, since each man had both of his opponents covered. It was all like a flash, and the men of the Bar fell back in every direction, expecting the fusillade to begin.

Yet, though the three bad men stiffened themselves, as if to meet whatever might be coming, not a shot followed. Straight, unwavering, pointed the deadly tubes, and on each of the cocked hammers rested a thumb.

This much the coolest spectators detected, and then they saw something more: not a finger touched a trigger, and as for the revolvers of Lightning Dick, no sign of guard or trigger had they!

It looked something like a farce that these three men, who drew as one, were enacting; but no farce was it.

The three had filed the catches out of the hammers of their revolvers, and the moment a thumb loosened it meant certain death to the man at the other end of the tube!

The man that fired now signed his own death-warrant, and each of the three, at the same instant, and a shade too late, had dropped to the nature of the game, small blame to them if they did not care to move.

"Even again, sports," cried a laughing voice. "You're all in hock; hadn't you better let me call a turn? Say something quick or I'll count you all out. Hands up I say. And as for the cheating, it's too awfully awful for a white man to sneeze at. I wrung that deck in on you, and there wasn't an ace in the pack. Hyer's the four safe in the leg of me boot. It's Little Lide that's talking, and she's lively on the shoot!"

It was a way out, and as the speaker closed the six hands went straight up, and the three men, turning, faced in the direction of the voice.

Little Lide was not unknown to the Bar; but to the three strangers she was something startling.

It was not that she had the look of a desperado, or was unsexed, or dissolute in appearance. It was rather that, despite a glint of experience in her eyes, and a careless, mocking manner in her voice, she looked so strangely out of place. Very handsome was she, and very petite, with clear complexion, lustrous blue eyes, regular features, and a great coiled mass of golden hair, which at times she wore over her shoulders in a great flood of ringlets. She had a perfect little form, too, that was well set off by the nondescript sort of dress that she wore; for though she had pantaloons whose loose, wide bottoms almost hid from view her tiny boots, she wore short skirts, which only reached to the knee—a very sensible costume for that region, and not half bad for any latitude, if a woman desires free, untrammelled movement.

As the three faced her, she executed a low but graceful bow.

"All men of sense, I see, and it would have been a shame to have piled up three stiff, when we need that kind so badly. But the next time don't raise bigger hands than there is in the wood."

"We go the outside hand and no discount for cash. It wins in the end. What next?"

"Oh, I have nothing to suggest, Mr. Lightning Dick, except that you might be in better business than trying to throw your life away butting against the toughest things you can find in Slaughter Bar. You're young yet, though, and I'm not so much surprised, but I did think there was more sense in Circus Pete—"

"Which are me."

"Meanin' me."

The two men chipped in promptly, but the knowledge that their skill was so evenly balanced, probably kept them from going to extremities.

"Meaning both of you. What circus did you travel with?"

She turned sharply to the one, as she spoke.

"Old Dan Rice; an' don't you furgit it."

"Nobody here ever forgets anything. And who brought you out?"

The other answered briskly:

"Old John Wilson; an' don't you furgit it. I knowed I war ther great original."

"Exactly; and the man they hung here last week traveled with Barnum. That settles it. There were three Circus Pete's in the field, and Slaughter Bar has already settled one of them, look out it don't go for the other two! We haven't any bad men here, but there are some boys that are howlers when they get raised, and we want to know what you're going to do about it. Then we'll know how to take you."

"Excuse me, miss, but whar there's three of a kind gits bunched in one hand, it would be a shame not to play 'em tergether. Ther best thing fur us three chiefs ter do, is ter hitch teams an' stand ther town. Wahoo! I'm Circus Pete, ez took ther road with old Dan Rice! I'm a boss with keards, a chief with er knife, an' ugly on ther shoot. Me an' my pards kin hold ther camp; who chips in on our lay-out? Wahoo!"

"Now you shout!" came in the laughing tones of the Lightning Sport; but the other

Circus Pete moved sullenly away, returning his revolver to his belt, as he went.

"One Circus Pete is 'bout ez much ez this camp kin kerry, an' I don't take no stock in ary sich pards. I reckon—"

"Hold on there; hold on!"

The voice of Lightning Dick rung out full and clear, while over his shoulder he suddenly dropped the muzzle of a revolver, his thumb resting on the hammer and the barrel aiming fair and square at a ragged, frowzy, unkempt-looking object, who had slunk up to the table lately vacated by the three players. With arms outstretched, he was just about to rake into the ragged, battered old hat that he held in his left hand the glittering heap that lay on the board.

"Great Jerusalem, pard, how did yer come ter nose him out? Yes, hole on, me angelic check charmer! Them's no sleepers on ther table, an' hyar's a party ez is mighty wide awake. Thar's a divvy ter be made outen them shiners. Git!"

The man addressed did not hesitate, but sprung back in such perturbation and haste that he struck against the corner of one of the seats, and that tripping him, he fell to the floor with a tremendous crash. As he dropped he yelled:

"Don't shute! Copperheads an' coal ile, don't shute! It's Howlin' Billy, ov Black Dam, an' ther honestest sucker outen jail."

A shout of laughter broke from every one in the room; but, high above it, rose a hoarse, commanding voice:

"Up with your hands and surrender, Circus Pete! I've got you lined!"

A second later there was the crashing sound of two pistol-shots, the chandelier fell, and the room was involved in semi-darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BULLION BOSS STRIKES THE BAR.

DARKNESS for the instant reigned in the Alhambra, but while the Bar hesitated, inclined to pass until it could see just where to chip in to advantage, there was a new sensation; for through the open door there came a strange, trampling, mysterious sound, as if gigantic forms were on the move, and then a burst of light as from half a dozen suddenly-opened lanterns.

Half a dozen were there, and half a dozen horsemen—or at least there were half a dozen figures that looked spectral enough, draped in flowing sheets of white, and with heads somewhere, concealed unless they were headless giants, for the robed figures reached up almost to the ceiling, which was at least fifteen feet, while under each form there was a coal-black steed, that was most plainly flesh and blood.

Through two slits in the white robes were outstretched hands, that also seemed as though they might be of flesh and blood.

Six of these hands grasped cocked revolvers, while each of the other six held forward an open lantern.

Under the flood of light every object in the saloon could plainly be seen—the excited crowd of people, some with weapons half drawn; the open door at the further end, through which some had made their escape, and the little tables, both of which were now vacant, and from one of which the glittering pile of gold and the wallets had mysteriously disappeared.

"I'm personally a stranger, no doubt," said the dark-faced man, who stood in front of the line of ranged horsemen, "but I flatter myself that when I mention I am known as the Bullion Boss, no one will question that by reputation I am very well known. I am here on a peaceful errand, however, not even connected with the process of tax levy or toll. Slaughter Bar had a square reputation until last week, and we had resolved to allow it to run an independent principality of its own. No nonsense there! You understand we've got you fairly covered, and while it is extremely unlikely you could find one of my men, it's certain that the first one of you who makes an offer keels over. Is it on the square now, or ain't it? Speak for the Bar, Judge Schneider."

More than one man had reached for his weapons; but it seemed to each one that, as he did so, a shining tube was silently turned directly upon him, and his fingers loosened at once.

Not even a murmur of surprise was to be heard at the bold announcement, though no one doubted its truth. Who else but the Bul-

lion Boss would have dared to "set up" such a game upon Slaughter Bar? Terrible road-agent that he was it was just like him to make his presence known in the neighborhood by just such a bold announcement.

And as the Bullion Boss upon ground of his own choosing had hitherto proved invincible it was probable that he had not thrown away any chances now. If he faced the Bar it was because he knew he held the drop. Here were half a dozen of his men in sight; but how many more were lurking outside in the shadows?

There was utter silence for the space of perhaps a minute; and then a murmur of unmistakable meaning.

But still Judge Schneider was voiceless.

Again the outlaw captain spoke; and this time more sharply:

"No trifling, judge. I'm dealing with you; and you ought to know that I mean business when I blow my horn. Yes or no, and the last time of asking."

"Any thing in reason, then. As long as you offer no harm to any of our people I can guarantee a perfect truce on our part, anyhow."

"See, then, that it is kept, for if it is not I can assure you that you will hang from the first thing that will hold a rope. And when we break the truce you chip in. That is your chance. Then the biggest hand takes the ante—and mine is large."

"Let us hear what you want. It is possible, and I suspect from what you have already said, it is certain, there need be no dissension between us."

"There won't be any because that takes two sides; and if we begin nothing else will be left before your side commences."

The road-agent answered quite coolly, and without the least evidence of being troubled about the matter, then he continued, in a somewhat more earnest tone:

"However, it's no harm to mention that we came here, first as a warning—secondly to take charge of an old time pard, one Circus Pete, who must have struck this camp to-day. I had him lined, but the slippery eel, when the lights went out dodged back somewhere. Trot him out and it may save a general jamboree."

"You may have him, then, for we don't want him half as bad as he wants us. But it's my opinion that if you find him much you won't want him bad, either."

Then came an interruption.

"No catchee, no havee! I could paste ye all up, but I won't plug ye this time. Good mornin'!"

The words rung through the room in a mocking tone, but one that was already familiar. They were certainly uttered by a Circus Pete, though which one was by no means certain. Every eye was instantly turned toward the window on the side of the room opposite to the door; and listening, the heavy gallop of a horse reached the ears of the men of the Bar, and then the faint echo of the remembered, "Waugh!"

"Curses on it, where is Number Seven?" exclaimed the leader, who, for the first time showed some impatience, though the six maskers sat their horses as unmoved as statues.

He bounded upward to the window, and looked out.

On the ground lay a dark, motionless figure. Number Seven was there—to stay. When the Circus Pete who made his exit on that side had flung his somersault through the window he had gone, knife in hand, and landed like a thunderbolt upon the guard, who was just creeping up. After that there was only one straight thrust, and not a single groan.

"If that man comes back to town I want him. By the gods, he shall hang for murder! His life is doubly forfeit."

As the leader turned from the window the men nearest to him shrunk away. The glare of the lanterns was full on his face; and for the moment it was the face of a devil, white to the lips, with eyes gleaming like coals, and one heavy vein of dark blood creeping across his forehead.

No one answered him.

"You hear me? He has killed my man and stolen his horse. If he returns here lay him by the heels and hand him over. If you don't the Bullion Boss comes back and sacks the town. You needn't make any answer, I'll see to it that you don't forget it. Now step up to the bar, you that choose, and drink. Where's Engine Jack, the sport that runs this shebang?"

Engine Jack was invisible. The place behind the bar was vacant, and only one lone decanter was to be seen.

"Where's Engine Jack?"

Bullion Boss looked around him with lowering brow as he barked out his question once more. Things were not going altogether right.

"Hyar I be," answered a voice.

The tones were smothered, but unmistakably those of the wanted man.

"Come out here, then, and set them up for the house. It will be money in your pocket, man."

"An' mebbe a slug in me head. Thankee, thankee; I'll stay whar I are. Thar's a vial on ther shelf ez 'll knock Mr. Bullion Boss an' ary ten galloots that ever h'isted benzine. That's my set up. Ef yer wants ter stand ther Bar in fur ther liquids put an eagle through ther knot-hole, an' I'll sling out ther flood lightnin' half an hour arter you leave town."

The voice sounded sepulchral as ever, and it seemed to puzzle the road-agent, though something like a smile came over the faces of the regular frequenters of the Alhambra.

"None of your dodging, you infernal idiot, but come out before we bring you out. If I have to come for you I'll take you all apart."

"Well, yer can't do ther job in a month ov Sundays. I'm hyar with ther cash-box, the barr'l ov mountain dew an' two Colts thet kick in six-six time. I'm stayin' hyar, an' don't yer furtit it. I ve nerve fur anything."

"And where are you?"

"Inside ther bar. It's copper-bottomed, iron-clad, bolted to ther rock, an' convenyent leetle holes ter open an' plug through. I've got yer lined now, an' I'd send yer down the shute a howlin' ef it wer'n't fur ther credit ov ther Bar. Er truce are a truce."

Bullion Boss deliberately raised his pistol and pointed it at about the spot from behind which the voice seemed to come.

"Oh, blaze away. Nothin' short ov a fifteen-inch siege-gun kin please her. I'll trade shots with yer all day. Yer don't think I'd run a ranch at Slaughter Bar without er place ov refooge. It's inch b'iler-iron, doubled an' bolted, an' I put up ther job meself."

Instead of raving, as the Bar expected him to, the captain of the road-agents broke into a short laugh, and advancing, dropped a couple of coins through the hole in the top of the bar which led to the cash-box.

"All right, we won't indulge in the vial on the shelf; but you can deal it out to your fellow-citizens after we leave."

He stepped back fearlessly and strode through the whole length of the building. If the people wanted a look at him they got it, and at the same time he got a look at them.

He came back, and, standing in the middle of the dance-room, waved his hand.

The six mounted figures bowed low in their saddles, but they never gave up their points, for their weapons kept as true a line as ever.

Then, at a slight motion of hands and knees, the six black steeds slowly and in line backed, one after the other, through the open door, vanishing away in the darkness that suddenly fell, as, with one motion, their lanterns were extinguished. The agents were going, and no one had enlightened them as to the duplicate nature of the sought-for Circus Pete, who had disappeared in sections.

As every one was looking at the point from whence came the noise, the silent, pantherish movements of the Bullion Boss were unseen, though at the instant the lights went out his voice rung clearly through the darkness:

"Good-night, and for fear you'll forget I'll take a hostage."

As he spoke his arm gathered up Little Lide, who had been a silent and somewhat amused spectator, and holding her in his iron grasp, he leaped through the window.

Then there was a pistol report outside.

CHAPTER XII.

VERNON'S ADVENTURE.

MISS NELLIE, from the time of the advent of the three strangers, had been in a state of wonderful excitement. Through the open door she looked, and watched what seemed to be the progress of a quarrel. Although comparatively new to such scenes she showed but little fear, and during the bit of juggling she clapped her hands in hearty applause. During the game she waited in breathless eagerness; and when the three, at its close, suddenly arose, and death for a second or two seemed so very certain, she dropped her hands to her own re-

volvers as though she would have gladly interfered in behalf of one or the other.

Something like a sigh of relief passed her lips as the intermission came without blood having been spilled, and she looked at Harley Vernon with a glance that seemed to say:

"That is the kind of men we raise at Slaughter Bar; how do you like them?"

And then came the interruption mentioned at the close of a preceding chapter; of which she, perhaps, alone knew the secret, for to every one there the voice was so far unknown that but few could even make a guess at its possible owner, and they were thinking of something else.

While the attention of the crowd was diverted by the bit of by-play with the disreputable Howlin' Billy, through the doorway there strode the tall, broad-shouldered man, with the face darkly but strangely handsome, who carried in either hand a cocked revolver.

Hardly had he entered the room when one of his barrels dropped in line with the nearest Circus Pete, and his challenge rung out with startling clearness.

And then Nellie saw Lightning Dick take a snap shot at the rope which upheld the candelabrum.

At that she turned and caught Vernon by the arm.

"Come," she said, in a quick whisper. "This is no place for us now; it is time that we were going."

He was a little surprised. At that moment everything looked more like business than at any time; how did it come that she wanted to be going just now? He said as much, in a few whispered words.

"Have you any friends there?" she asked coolly.

"Scarcely."

"And do you want to kill anybody?"

"Not at all."

"And you scarcely are mad enough to want to die yourself, so come on and keep your eyes well open, for stay or go, you are in no little danger."

"And your father?"

"If he chooses to live at Slaughter Bar he must run his chances."

The two were already on the move, passing out of the door in the rear. Vernon stared at the young lady. If this was the sort of filial affection that was developed in the West its influences must be deadening indeed.

He had no intention of deserting her, however, until she was safely stowed away at her home, wherever that might be. He hurried on by her side, dropping the Albambra immediately behind them; and they were just in time.

When they had gone some distance Vernon asked:

"And what is likely to be the end of this? I confess it all looks serious enough for a terrible tragedy to follow the prologue."

"Perhaps. No one can guess. If things go as before the regenerating efforts of the Vigilantes they will begin to shoot away in the dark all every man has wasted all the charges he thinks he can spare. Then they will hold on, some one will light a lantern, they will pick out the dead from the badly wounded, call it a drawn game, drink, the music will strike up, and the ball will go on. There is a strange element there to night, however; and what the actual result will be I cannot even guess."

"You mean the strangers, I suppose. Who are they?"

"Exactly. You know most as much of them as I do. They have probably heard of the Bar, and each on his own account has come down to test what it was worth. They will carouse around until they get shot, or are obliged to levant; though they seem abundantly able to hold their own with almost any odds against them. Such men have dropped down here before."

"And that strange girl, Little Lide! Who is she? Certainly she is not of the class one would expect to see carousing at such a place."

"Now, you are propounding a question you can hardly expect me to answer. Who is she? How can I tell? She is an anomaly. Long as I have been at the Bar I have never spoken to her, though I have heard of her time and again, and been near her more than once. There must be some instinctive antipathy on my part or hers, for the life of me I cannot tell which, that has kept us apart."

"But you have heard who she is, and what she does here?"

"Little Lide they call her, and I don't know that she claims any other name. I will say for her that she is a sharp, sbrewd woman, or girl, that knows how to make dollars, and how to invest them, and the oddest thing about it is that she has the quietest man in town for a partner, John Oaks, a cripple. They keep a store over yonder, you can see the building there, and a very good thing they have of it. It seems odd—but she manages to get even so far as filthy lucre goes. And now what are you doing here? A lonely traveler, searching for sights, would scarcely penetrate to this valley; you do not look like an investor, and I am pretty certain you are not a sport. Are you a man with a mission?"

"Pardon me if I do not answer your questions with all of your own engaging frankness; but I do not yet know myself. I suppose I am on what, in your western parlance, is called a wild-goose chase, and I hardly know what I hope to find. Until I do, perhaps I had better keep my fancies to myself."

"Thank you," said Miss Nellie, with cool sarcasm in her tone. "As you are such a very self-contained gentleman, I doubt if I have any further use for you; but, should you desire, at some future time to make the revelations, you know where I live. I wish you a very good night."

Vernon put out his hand, perhaps to detain her, perhaps to say good-night over it, but she waved it aside with a short little laugh, and turning, disappeared within the building in front of which they had halted, leaving him standing alone upon the lonely street, not altogether satisfied with the termination of his adventure.

He thrust his hands in his pocket, shrugged his shoulders, and stepped backward until he could obtain a good view of the house.

It was not a palace; but it was about the best residence that Slaughter Bar could boast of. It was a stoutly built little house, and though it had some pretensions to ornamentation, Vernon saw that it was possible to turn it into a regular fortification. There were heavy window shutters, and the building stood by itself on higher ground than any of the neighboring ones. Moreover, and what was unusual, it was possessed of an upper story, or what passed for such there, though on the eastern side of the mountains it would not have been dignified with a grander name than attic.

These observations, and such others as he made, Vernon jotted down on his mental tablets, and then turned away—not positively certain in which direction he should wend his way.

The Albambra was nearly half a mile distant, for Slaughter Bar was a straggling town, and Judge Schneider had chosen a spot at the opposite end, where he was removed from close contact with the head-quarters of the under elements, and had three or four honest, respectable neighbors within supporting distance. Vernon did not care to wend his way back to the saloon, for he was of the opinion that the game of pistol draw would only be interesting in a professional point of view. He had thought he heard shots in the distance but that hardly drew him. If the wind-up was a riot, he was not so insanely curious to see the result of it, and the very truth was, though he hardly knew it, that he was thoroughly tired from several days' traveling and several nights' loss of sleep. The attractions of the only partially tested accommodations at the "Pilgrim's Pride" seemed to grow in their possibilities, and he decided to turn his steps thitherward. He gave a last glance back over his shoulder, and as he did so a little line of light streamed out through a crack in the heavy shutters of the attic.

"Bright spark of hope, shed your beam on me," hummed the young man, and then broke off with a laugh.

"The idea!" he muttered. "The fandango belle—what a passport that title would be to society everywhere. And yet the cool young Juno could hold her own anywhere, I doubt not. For beauty, intelligence and education, few are more than her peer. And she has all of the jealousy of her sex. I fancy if I wanted to advance my cause it was not the best plan to introduce the name of Little Lide. She is the rival near the throne. Strange that two such girls should be found at this spot, the last on earth one would suppose a woman who

had had a taste of refined life and was uncom-pelled by fate would choose to stop at."

He stopped in his soliloquy and held up his head to listen.

Through the night there seemed to come the sound of a distant swelling roar.

"What these Americans would call business appears to be in the air. There's noise enough for an army, and the advance guard alone could gather me in at a mouthful. Unless I cut and run for it I'm in a fair way to fall in with the rabble; and running is so very undignified after one gets out of jackets. No. I'll stand my ground, though it does seem like a charge of cavalry."

Notwithstanding this decision the young Englishman looked around him in search of some near and convenient hiding-place of refuge.

Unfortunately there was a gap in Slaughter Bar at that precise spot. For a number of rods around him there were no shanties, and it was doubtful if he could reach the cover of the nearest hut with ever so great an effort.

Looking closer, however, he saw that fate had been kind to him, since he saw a dark shadow near by, where a huge log lay, not far from the roadside.

He was behind it in an instant, and had his revolvers out, for though he hoped there would be no occasion to use them, he knew it was just as likely that he would have the chance.

And there was no mistake about the horsemen being in the advance, though probably from the noise of the shouting, there was a swarm of footmen a long way in the rear.

What did it all mean?

A dozen phantoms suddenly loomed up before his watching eyes. A dozen feet high they seemed, bolt upright, ghastly and white and coming on like a whirlwind.

He could not believe his own senses and involuntarily he cowered close to his log.

Yet just as the leading horsemen were abreast of him he heard, from one that lagged a little behind, first a smothered sort of sound—and then a woman's clear, ringing, earnest cry.

"Help! help!"

And the voice was that of Little Lide.

Vernon's pistols were ready, and the cry nerved him to instant action. He felt reasonably sure of his aim, and as the rider came abreast, without any thought of his own danger, he took quick aim at the horse, and fired.

The shot was more successful than he had dared to hope. The horse gave a bound into the air and then a great, floundering pitch forward, showing that he was hard hit, while the white figure upon his back swayed violently, as though almost unhorsed by the sudden shock.

At the same time a small, dark figure shot down into the road, bounded over the log, and running for dear life, disappeared in the darkness, though the laugh of Little Lide floated back, as if in mockery. Evidently she had made good her escape.

Harley Vernon had drawn his hammer back for another shot—and then thanked his lucky stars that it was not needed.

Horse and horseman shot suddenly forward at runaway speed, and the other phantoms, or whatever they might be, went along, a happy mistake of which the young man took instant advantage. He sprang up and away in the wake of the girl fugitive, and though he did not overtake her, he was soon in the rear of the rearest row of shanties.

He kept straight on, and thus escaping the mob, of which he had a glimpse, he finally came to the very goal of his wishes—the Pilgrim's Pride.

Satisfied that the young lady had made her escape and that his help would be unneeded, he entered, and was shown to his bed without a word of question or explanation.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GRISLY JEST.

THE intelligence of what had been transpiring at the Albambra had not yet reached the Pilgrim's Pride when Harley Vernon retired, so that he remained in blissful ignorance of what might mean the white-robed figures that he had encountered.

If it had not been for his native reticence he might have mentioned something at the Pride which would have brought out a hint of the probable truth and raised a ripple of excitement—that only came after he was sound asleep.

The reader will remember that at the fall of

the chandelier, and the darkening of the dance-hall, Nellie Schneider had taken possession of her escort and quietly slipped away. The climax seemed to have arrived; when no further preliminaries were left and the shooting in the darkness must begin.

Yet the climax had not come, though the majority of the people in the room supposed so. Some started to make their exit through the rear room, and others threw hands to revolvers with an angry snarl, though hesitating to draw and fire. The musicians made a clear jump into the bar, and the two Circus Petes, for whom the darkness seemed simply providential, took a brace of flying leaps through the windows by which they had entered. If the dark-browed gentleman who answered to the name of Bullion Boss had, at the time of the request for an elevation of hands, a line on Circus Pete, he was a shade too late about crooking his finger.

And Lightning Dick's plan of proceedings, that he had hastily mapped, did not hold out either. The blazing candles dropped, to be sure, and the lamp on the shelf behind the bar vanished; but so also did the money on the table, of which he had firmly intended to take charge. He thought that he heard a sweet, tinkling sound, and when in the blackness of the room he sprang to the table, he found it empty.

The fact was, Howlin' Billy, just as the lights went down, held his hat at the edge, and with one sweep of his arm gathered coin and purses in. Then he tucked the battered chapeau under his arm, dodged into the next room, went out just behind Nellie Schneider and her escort, and darting to one side, almost immediately, ran away as fast as his legs could carry him; while a moment later Lightning Dick followed in hot pursuit. It was not very dignified, but the battered old hat of the bumholder held treasure enough for a dozen sacrifices to dignity.

"He, he," snickered Billy, his limber legs getting over the ground at a rate that one would scarcely have believed possible. "Twelve aces on their board an' three decks ov 'em in the'r boots; an' hyar's Howlin' Billy, ov Black Dam, takin' ther pot with one leetle old pa'r ov legs. Who'd 'a' thunk it? Ole Daddy Bender, ov Black Dam, a millyonare. Ther whisky skins an' b'iled terrapin at ther Astor! Oh, Elijur fish bites! Hyar's fatness fur these yere ole bones at las'. We'll turn up a spade till they git ther eyes shut, an' then Howlin' Billy Bender, ov Black Dam, 'll go Yeast."

He did not cease from his exertions, however, for his legs ran along even faster than his thoughts. He reached the bluffs that ran up from the west of the Bar, and without ever giving a glance behind him, plunged into a little canyon, whose narrow mouth could only have been found by one familiar with the spot.

He found the spade, too, of which he had spoken, hidden behind some bushes. He drew it out, carefully deposited the precious hat on a huge rock, and then, finding a soft spot near that suited him, he began to dig.

"I'm plantin' ther hull crop in one furrer," he continued, to himself, as he leaned the spade against his thigh to spit on his hands, "an' I'll bet any man rocks I kin tell what ther harvest 'll be—br'iled 'isters at Delmoniker's, canvas-backs at ther Winzer, an' soup at ther Bowery hash-houses. Oh, Elijer, won't I sprout! An' thar, I reckon ther hole's ov ther right bigness, an' ef I kiver it keerful, thar ain't no two-legged snipe 'cept Daddy Bender ez kin find that ante. It would hold a post. Yah! Ouch! Murder! Don't! It's only me, Howlin' Billy, ov Black Dam, diggin' fish-bait. I say, ho'e on."

The sudden change in Howlin' Billy's manner was brought about with a simplicity that was astonishing. Just as he stooped lowest to peer into the hole, he heard, right at his ear, about as startling a sound as a man well could hear at such a time—the hammer of a pistol, forced back. At the same time something hard and cold seemed to be crowding its way right into the drum of his ear.

There was no trouble about his recognizing what it was, and then it was that he began to dance up and down, though taking care to keep his hands up, and not to attempt to get away. He rather expected that he was in 'for a wooden overcoat, in the first flush of his astonishment.

Then, though the muzzle kept its position as if glued there, he twisted his head around until he could get a glimpse of the trouble.

The hat remained on the rock; but there was a young man sitting on the hat—Lightning Dick.

He drew back a little the pistol that he held to the bumholder's ear; but at the same time raised another.

Mr. Bender's hands went up if anything an inch higher, and he flopped down upon his knees.

Then the Lightning Sport carelessly threw his pistols back in their holsters and picked up the spade, which had fallen from the hands of the frightened Howlin' Billy. He measured the depth of the hole and nodded. Then, still silent, he measured the bumholder with the handle of the tool, and marked off his exact length on the ground, handing him the spade with a significant gesture.

There was not a particle of doubt concerning the intention; Billy took the spade and set to work, while the sport sat down again on the rock.

The soil, fortunately, was mellow, and progress was rapid. In a short time he had a narrow little trench dug. He stopped once or twice, and each time the silent figure raised a hand, that again held a revolver. Finally, as he stooped over his work, the silent avenger quietly approached him from behind, and snatching away the spade, by a single dexterous wrench flung him at full length along the bottom of the trench, above the sides his heels appearing an instant in the air before he went down with a prodigious bang, that momentarily took away his breath.

When he recovered, the Lightning Sport was quietly filling the dirt in on him.

"Great Elijer!" he shouted. "Hold on! I'm alive yit. Yer wouldn't bury a man w'ot wasn't a corpse?"

The question was pertinent, but apparently unfortunate. For a man buried alive there might be some hope; for a dead man there would be none in this world; and from Howlin' Billy's record here there was very little hope for his hereafter. He should certainly have known better. At the question up came the ready revolver once more.

"Elijer fish bites, don't! Shovel in ther gravel, but let this sinner live," yelled Billy, at the sight; and then he lay motionless, while the other heaped the loam upon him, patted the top nicely into shape, and stuck the spade in for a headboard. It was a ghastly, cruel jest; but Bender almost deserved it.

However, the dull sounds of the retreating footsteps had scarcely died away when there was a young earthquake within the newly-made grave, a regular upheaval of the alluvial, and Billy came to the surface, comparatively uninjured.

He spit and spluttered, sat for a moment to rest and recuperate, and then, picking up his battered hat, which he found was empty and as flat as a pancake, he jammed it upon his head, and deliberately retraced his steps, steering once more for the Alhambra.

All this was unimportant, but it explains how it came that Lightning Dick happened to be counted out of the affair at the saloon, which, perhaps, for him, was very fortunate.

There was one person who was quietly "holding his age" during the greater part of the time that the Bullion Boss held the Alhambra.

That was the favorite pupil of Dan Rice; the man who was supposed to have made his escape on the steed of the defunct road agent.

Not a bit of it!

It was true that he had deftly put his knife through the masked outlaw, and caught the reins from his stiffening fingers; but he had no intention of leaving, and his defiance was only a blind. He turned the horse's head away from the building and gave the animal a vicious prod with his reeking knife. When the steed bounded off he quietly stole around the further end of the building, just in time to avoid being seen by two of the outlaws, who had been told off to keep guard outside, and who, alarmed by the noise, ran to the aid of their comrade.

So it happened that this Circus Pete played hide and seek, while the Bullion Boss held the inside, and having changed his head-quarters from rear to front, was crouching at the window as the masked horsemen came trooping out.

Then he raised his hands.

"They're hunting Circus Pete, are they?" he muttered. "Dog-gone 'em, he's right hyar; let's see what they'll do when they find him."

He raised his thumb, the hammer dropped, and at that moment the Bullion Boss, with Little Lide in his arms, came through the window and knocked him endways, the bullet hurtling harmlessly into the air. When he sprang to his feet, after a few seconds of mental blank, the phantom-like forms were flitting away in the distance, while the Bar, maddened by the breach of the truce, was swarming out into the night air, too late worked up to the point of resistance, and realizing at last that there was something more than a simple frolic in this visit of the road-agents.

For perhaps a minute the hubbub lasted, and then there were a dozen mounted men to take the lead, and a great crowd of footmen. In the wake of the agents they started, and in the van, mounted on a spotted mustang, rode Circus Pete.

As the crowd reached the store of John Oaks, a shout went up, and a dozen bangs sounded at his door, while various voices yelled:

"Git up, John Oaks, an' roll out ter hear ther news. Yer pard, Little Lide, hez gone up ther flume."

John Oaks made no sign—he never did on such occasions—but a light appeared at the next window, and Little Lide herself put her head out.

"Scarcely, scarcely," she said. "He caught me on the up grade and kept the brakes down a bit, but it takes sand to hold Little Lide. Thank you all, gentlemen, but I get away, and I'm still here to stay."

A hoarse cheer arose as she closed the window, and the pursuit ceased, though parties patrolled the town the rest of the night.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE JUDGE MEETS VARIOUS UNWELCOME FRIENDS.

WHEN Miss Nellie and her father met at the breakfast-table the following morning, the judge had an abstracted air that did not escape the keen eyes of the young lady. As she was still busy with her own thoughts, the meal passed with scarcely a word said.

Then the judge looked up sharply.

"I hope you were satisfied with the result of your excursion last night."

"Tolerably so, my venerated parent; though for the amount of wool there seemed a very great cry. The Bar is really not as blood-thirsty as I supposed."

"You are a foolish girl, and know nothing about it. It was the luckiest chance that there was not a general cleaning up."

"I think that prudence had a little to do with it. I admired the judgment that kept coolly calculative under the aim of the young man who introduced himself as Lightning Dick."

The brow of the judge wrinkled in a frown, for there was a sarcasm in the young girl's tone that was hard to bear.

"An impudent, treacherous, worthless braggart, he is; and Slaughter Bar would sooner have his room than his company. He will find out before he gets through with us that this is not the place to come to put on frills. He will be warned out of camp to day; he and the two ruffians, who so boastfully laid claim to the name of Circus Pete."

"And I wouldn't mind a small wager that he won't go. The man is no braggart, as you will find out; and the two ruffians, as you call them, are about on a level with our elite. I expect to meet them in our first circles."

The judge scarcely understood what the young lady was driving at; but it was certain that she was not in a very penitential state of mind over her escapade of the night before. He did not, therefore, tell her of the sequel, and the danger that had menaced Little Lide. Instead, he arose rather abruptly, and swung himself out of the room, forgetting even to ask the questions that he had intended to in regard to Harley Vernon.

Nellie, however, followed him to the door.

"By the way, if you happen to stumble across him you might as well thank that young Englishman for seeing me safely home last night. He is a gentleman, anyhow; and left at the most interesting part of the exercises, without a murmur, to accommodate a lady. Don't forget, dear."

She shot this after him; but when he turned to hear fuller particulars the door went shut with a bang; and he went away with no further information on the subject.

He did not seek the Pilgrim's Pride, how-

ever, but soon leaving the camp behind him, walked away in the direction of the Hair Pin Lode, where he expected to find Sandy McQuoid. It was only a mile or so from his house, and the judge scarcely thought of meeting any one in his walk; but before he had gone half that distance he halted suddenly, and looked suspiciously at a figure that unexpectedly appeared a little in advance.

It was the handsome young sport who had made his appearance at the Alhambra the night before.

The sight of his face then had produced an irritating effect on Judge Schneider; and the sight of his back had pretty much the same effect now. He halted but a moment and then strode forward; but this time with a cat-like step. It was more than likely he had not been seen or heard, and once more he tried his snakelike tactics, which had failed the night before.

Lightning Dick belied his name this morning, for he was proceeding leisurely enough, strolling along with his head down, apparently in deep thought. The man in the rear gained rapidly. He had already drawn and cocked his revolver so that no sound would startle his intended victim. Five yards nearer and he would be ready to raise it; and he did not believe that he could be foiled as he had been the night before.

"I'm wrong—I know I'm wrong," he muttered to himself. "It can't be—and yet I'll run the chances, and kill him for good luck. He took his life in his hand when he came here; and if he's Clinton Bride's son, so much the better for me. If it's not, what difference?"

He kept on, taking three steps to the young man's two, and his hand was just nerving to rise when he heard the same careless laugh of the night before; and, over the shoulder of the pedestrian, with a sudden swing, came a pistol-barrel.

"Don't you try it, judge, or I shall have to salt you; and at this stage of the game it don't suit my hand. You saw my back-handed work last night, and I'd be just as sure at the bridge of your nose as I was at the blade of my knife."

"Hold on, young man!" exclaimed the other, sharply. "I've no bad intentions, but in this country when you see a man draw its generally time to begin to shoot. I saw you were ready, and I tried to be in shape to defend myself. You have the drop on me, though, and I'll put up. What is it you want?"

It was very true that Lightning Dick held the drop. Schneider was cooler than he was the night before, and even then he knew when he was lined, though it was a mystery just how the thing was done.

"Let that hammer down very carefully, and put that pistol back in your belt. That's what I want. Then you can drive on as fast as you choose. I'm out for fresh air, and to stretch my legs a bit. Bless your soul, I don't want a man for breakfast."

"That's a likely story," growled the judge, who nevertheless carefully obeyed the order. "More likely that you are here spying around to get some points on the Hair Pin, or something of that kind."

"Any thing to please you. Supposing I was; what then?"

"This: we don't want you here, and you had better leave before it gets too hot for you. Take warning. You or Slaughter Bar has got to move; and I guess you know it won't be the Bar that will go."

"Why, judge, what's the trouble? I thought I'd be right at home here, act as a kind of safety-valve. Double, back-acting, self-regulating balance-wheel, so to speak."

"You struck the wrong camp to set up such a lay as that. We've got no surplus population here now. A week ago we removed all that we wanted to lose. The men here now are honest, hard working miners; and if you stir up bad blood now you strike at the whole community."

"That's down very straight. Engine Jack and the crowd that gathers at the Alhambra are honest, hard workers—in a horn. You men that have stamps invested here ought to pay me if I make a little elbow-room. All the same, this is the third hitch you've had, and now I want to know—why?"

So far the sport had flung his words backward. Now he wheeled suddenly, and looked the judge firmly in the face.

"You are mistaken," was the hasty answer. "I am one of the representatives of law and order here, and unfortunately we have to proceed with weapons in our hands. You have chosen to come here as an acknowledged desperado and king-pin of sports. As such I must keep an eye on you. Probably you are my superior with the deadly weapons of your trade, yet you will find me ready to defend myself at all times as best I can, though I scarcely believe you would be mad enough to court the certain death that would follow a deliberate murder. Had you selected a different role I would have met you with friendly frankness; as it is I can only give you full warning that you tarry here at your own risk. I want no further quarrel now; do you bar my path, or shall I pass on?"

"Ah!"
With the simple exclamation for answer the sport bowed low, and waved his hand to indicate that so far as he was concerned the way was clear and the conference ended. If he put a world of sarcasm and unbelief into the monosyllable it was no wonder. The judge's explanation did not hang well together, though it had one redeeming feature. After hearing it there could be little doubt of his intentions. He said nothing in response; but stepped briskly forward, passing the young man, who stood with his arms folded, though one hand was suspiciously near to a revolver. He was ready for any attempted treachery, yet showed no concern. As the judge came abreast of him he walked leisurely away, directing his footsteps toward Slaughter Bar, vanishing presently around a bend, perhaps a hundred yards distant.

The judge had halted a moment before. Risky or not, his curiosity overcame his prudence, and he turned for a last glance at the disappearing stranger.

Although he had managed to keep from any manifestation during the interview, there was no question but what he was deeply shaken by the meeting. Now his lips moved. Without knowing it he spoke aloud:

"Can I be right in this infernal suspicion? All the facts are dead against it, it is utterly impossible that it should be true, and I must be losing my nerve to even dream of it. And yet, that face! There cannot be two such faces in the world. And I ought to know it—even in the bottomless pit."

"Right you are; and no fool would you be, there or elsewhere, to want to spoil its beauty. But he can take care of himself, and for the present I'll claim your attention."

The judge looked hastily around, and as he did so he saw a face which he instantly placed as that of the outlaw leader known as the Bullion Boss. Was it chance that brought them together again?

CHAPTER XV.

A SLEEPING WEASEL.

"You see that we have met again, judge. Your hand seems to fit into mine, and it strikes me that it wouldn't be a bad plan to play them out as pards."

The judge looked sulkily up. It was evident that he did not admire the man or the meeting.

If he had had any money in his pockets it is possible that he would have made an offensive movement; as it was, he scowled in silence.

"You don't like that idea. That's because you think you hold a big hand, and don't know anything about the strength of mine. You're a tolerably large man here, where they don't know you, and it looks as though you owned all out doors; but Slaughter Bar is your smallest ante, eh? You are setting up a cold deck to wring in for millions. Nothing small about you."

"I don't know what you're driving at, but I can tell you that if you are after plunder, you have come to the wrong shop. I haven't a dollar in my pockets, and I never have. You can turn them inside out if you want to. And I think you're shrewd enough not to want to do me any harm. When anything happens to me there are twenty or thirty men that wouldn't rest or sleep much until they had roused out the party that did the job."

"Ah! It strikes me that you are threatening me. My friend, wolf don't eat wolf as long as there's mutton to be had for the taking; but if the time should come that I want you, I'll gather you in with your twenty or thirty men. You've heard of me."

"Yes, if you told the truth last night."

"If! Be a little careful there. There's not

the man living that can say I broke my word, or told him a lie. There's not a man living that ever did say it. Some few may have tried it on, but they died shortly after."

The Bullion Boss chuckled and folded his arms.

The words seemed to have a tranquilizing effect on the judge. He studied the face of the outlaw more thoroughly, and noted that it was not threatening. What the man said was solid enough truth, but the tone was careless, the sudden demise of the doubters was spoken of as a matter of course. If there was any way of avoiding it it was better, also, not to have this man for an enemy. The judge changed his tune.

"See here, I'm willing to put hands on the table, if I don't for the present show my cards. You want something of me—what is it?"

"Now you talk. It's no use, you see, to dodge when I pull the trigger, so you stand up to the rack. That's what I like to see, and for a send-off I'll tell you one or the other of us ain't just as safe as might be, and maybe both. There's a detective down here now on a trail that may run one fox to earth, if not two."

"What have I to fear from detectives, my friend. Down here I am the law itself."

"Stuff! I reckon this man won't take much account of such home made articles. If there's anything in the past or prospects for the future that you don't want raked up, there's one man that's bad to have in the ring, and the first letter of the name he goes by here is Circus Pete."

"Which man do you mean? There seems to be a dozen of them. We hung one last week. What does he want of me?"

"You hung the wrong man, then, and it's just as well you did, for I want him first. It's the man I had lined last night when the lights went out."

"And I can't say which of them it was. No matter. You are talking in riddles. My life is open to the world."

"So is mine; and a mighty bad sort of life it is. Clinton Bride and Clinton Bride's son would swear to that, eh?"

"I know nothing of Clinton Bride. Why should you bring up his name?"

"That's right, stick to your platform. Probably you never heard anything of Milton Waite either, or the Vernons of Vernon Hall. Why, man alive, I know you."

Instinctively the judge put up his hand and said:

"Hush!"

"That brings you, does it? Suppose I tell you that you are Roger Vernon, and as big a scoundrel as the worst of the younger brothers ever are, with more crimes on your head than there are letters to your name, and that outlaw though I am, I can give your neck to the rope? You will want to say 'hush' again, won't you?"

In very truth that was what the judge did, for he threw up his hand with a warning gesture and looked around as if in fear of a possible listener.

"You needn't trouble yourself. No one would believe the words of a road-agent against an honorable man like yourself—until they heard his proofs. If Clinton Bride left a son, for instance, he might storm around a little. It was big money that disappeared—some say a quarter of a million—and the boy might want to get his fingers on the stamps as well as on the throat of the man who killed his father."

"What have I to do with this rigmarole? Speak out. Let me know what terms you want me to make. You wouldn't waste time if you didn't think you had me where you could dictate terms, and if you had not something to gain by enforcing them. What is it?"

"Thanks for your suggestion. I see that you are coming to your senses at last. I'm ready to talk. The facts are brief. Unfortunately I am known here and elsewhere too well to have the run of the town without a small army at my back. Otherwise I would let you go ahead and make my points at the muzzle of the pistol. As it is, I see that the game is coming to the critical moment, and I stand a chance to be left in the cold. While I am removing obstructions you will scoop in the plunder and be beyond reach. Halves! That's my idea. Give me the help of your score of ruffians that you know you picked with an eye to business, and I will return the compliment by putting mine at your disposal. Finish up your job in the same style that you

have begun it, and then I will either take a six sum—say a quarter of a million, or we will go in and occupy together."

"A quarter of a million! You must be crazy. I can command no such sum. All I am worth is the interest that I have here, and you know yourself it would be hard to realize that without going to the money centers."

"I understand. There might be some unpleasant recognitions if you went. Very well. If need be, when we have finished up our work here, I will go. We will each have a hold over the other. There will be no breaking of compacts."

"But the work here? You demand a big price, and so far as I can see for silence only. What is there in which you can aid?"

The judge had changed his tone altogether. He watched his *vis-a-vis* keenly. It began to look as though he saw some reason in this strange proposition. Slaughter Bar might have been astonished to see it, but certainly he was bargaining with the outlaw.

"Silence is a great deal in some cases. Then there are several removals to be made, the necessities for which perhaps I see more clearly than you do, and which you cannot safely move in."

"For instance?"

"There is this detective. He has matters arranged, in a quiet sort of way. If anything happens to him, it will be well if you can prove an *alibi*. Of your hands his partners will ask his life, though they know nothing of the bottom facts. A false scent at the outset will save you. They can hunt and welcome for the outlaw whom men know only as the Bullion Boss."

"True. What else?"

"This girl. She is sharp as a steel-trap. Would it not be better that I should deal with her?"

"Ah!"

The judge started. Then, in his firmer tone, continued:

"And what more?"

"The son of Clinton Bride. He bears, or should bear his father's name. He is a better man; and you will find him no mean foe, if he is indeed on your trail."

"You're on the wrong track. The Brides, father and son, are dead. The warm soil of the Missouri bottoms covers the one. Tons of rocks the other. Of them I have no fear."

"Why, then, did you risk your life drawing on the handsome sport?"

"Why? Because the face moved me in spite of myself. I hate any man who wears such likeness, though Clinton Bride be dead."

"Nevertheless the son lives."

The outlaw spoke in serious, earnest style—and in the silence that would otherwise have followed there came an answering echo. From the gulch that lined the one side of the trail it wandered up, faint yet unmistakably the tones of the Lightning Dick whom Schneider had watched disappearing down the road.

"He does indeed!"

Then followed a short, bitter laugh; and again all was still.

It was only for an instant that the two men stared at each other, thunderstruck at this evidence that at this spot, where they seemed safest from interruption, the most unacceptable of eavesdroppers was around.

Then the Bullion Boss sprang recklessly over the steep bank, plunging downward in the direction from whence the voice proceeded. A little more cautiously the judge followed. It was a good time and place to have the settlement that, after this, he knew must come; and he had, perhaps, a faint hope that the old story of the Kilkenny cats might be repeated if he held back a little. It would be a blessed relief if the outlaw and the sport would shoot each other; if the chance came for a certainty he would not object to assist in the mutual operation.

The two men reached the almost level ground at the bottom of the gulch at almost the same time; and had seen nothing of their quarry. No one had hidden along the side of the slope; and yet they had heard nothing of a retreat through the bushes. What could have become of him?

They moved along more cautiously now, and in a few paces came to a leafy covert.

Before this the outlaw halted.

From under its dense foliage there came a sound which it was easy enough to recognize—the regular breathing of a sleeper who snored.

"What game is this?" thought the judge, as he listened; but on the instant the Bullion Boss jerked out a pair of handcuffs, and flung himself recklessly through the bushes, upon a sleeping man.

As the boughs parted Schneider recognized the face of a Circus Pete—which one he was unable to say. The grand fact remained that here was one weasel asleep, and the hunter's hand hanging over him.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WEASEL AWAKE.

WHAT might be the game, if any, that this man who hailed from Bitter Creek was trying to play, was not so plain. Perhaps none at all.

His regular breathing remained unaltered until the very second that the hands of the Bullion Boss touched his wrists, over which, a moment later, the handcuffs would have clasped.

Then he seemed to come suddenly to his senses, for his wrists flew apart, and he began a short but desperate struggle. Out from the bushes the two rolled, nearly overturning the judge as they came, the one trying to fling the other to the ground and keep him there, while he, in turn tried to break the iron gripe upon his wrists.

The two were certainly evenly matched, since each, working at a disadvantage, was unable to accomplish his end.

Meantime the one spectator remained neutral.

If he had followed the promptings of his brain, he would have drawn his pistol and shot them both; but in the presence of two such chiefs a single prudential consideration restrained him. While he was getting away with the one the other might get away with him. He only had the one revolver, and in the breath of time required to cock it and turn from the one to the other there would be a fatal opportunity.

Besides the sounds of the shots might attract spectators whom it would not be so safe to dispose of; and the judge had a horror of dying declarations. They carried more weight than the words of an unarmed man, especially if made by a detective.

So he waited, with a nervous smile on his lip.

After a time the struggle ceased. The two men stood facing each other, and breathing, a little rapidly. The Bullion Boss still had his gripe on the wrists of Circus Pete, who still held his hands apart.

They rapidly regained their breath, and the judge was looking for the struggle to begin again, when the silence was broken:

"See hyar, boss, yer got hold on ther-wrong weasel. I'm a terror on wheels; but so be you. It 'pears ter me that on this yere hand it'd be better fur us ter be pards."

"It's no use, Dan Sliter. You've taken the contract and you'll never let go till you're planted. I was after you last night; I've got you now. I reckon I'll keep you."

"If you picked me up fur Dan Sliter—Detective Dan—the best thing you kin do is ter drop me an' go on ter ther next camp. I'm not yer game; though I kin give yer a point er two ez'll make yer eyes snap. Look me squar' in ther face an' say ef I'm yer man."

He looked up bluffly, seeming to court the searching gaze that fell upon him, and to enjoy the expression of doubt that he saw creeping into the eyes of his captor.

"If you are not Circus Pete, who are you, then?"

He spoke thoughtfully, and was evidently struggling with a memory that he could not altogether grasp.

"Oh, I'm Circus Pete, sure enough. It's ther other chap ez is ther fraud. Ef Dan Sliter is on this trail it's more ner likely ez you'll find him a-stealin' my name; we're much ov a bigness, an' thar ain't no other man livin' c'u'd 'a' capped my tricks like him."

"The other?"

The outlaw spoke inquiringly.

"Yes, I reckon yer don't know ez thar war two ov us at ther Alhambry las' night. Ask ther judge, thar, ther sort er game ez war put up on me when I bounced through ther window an' sot up fur a chief."

The judge advanced and in a few brief words told the story. When he had finished that he turned to the captive:

"You're pretty much of a likeness, but I fancy you are the man who had the deal in

that wonderful game. Now can you tell me how each one of you came to hold four aces?"

"Tain't ser easy; but I kin give er sorter guess, an' in this sorter game, ez you don't look like er card sharp, I'll sling out my idear."

"Three sich men ez we war couldn't be fooled by no sot up deck. Each one on us run ther keeards through, keerless like, afore ther game begun, an' see'd thar war no ace in 'em. Then I dealt meself four from ther bottom, ther other Pete raised four; an' ez fur ther Lightnin' Sport—I opine ther ratty young heifer they call 'Leetle Lide' slipped em' in his hand. So thar we was; an' when we draw'd it war sich an even thing that all three held ther drop, an' if any cuss hed shot it would 'a' got er way with ther hull crowd."

The Bullion Boss seemed to listen to this explanation with interest. The fact of duplicate Petes introduced a new feature into the game. He looked from the judge to the speaker and back again.

"Is all this a fact?" he asked.

"A man of your broad intelligence and extensive knowledge oughtn't to ask such a question. It's a fact, however; what are you going to do about it?"

"I must see." Then to his prisoner: "Who are you; where did you come from; what do you want here, and what did you mean listening to our talk?"

"You've got my handle, but ef yer don't like it pick up another; I ain't choicery. I kin hyar by dergrees, roamin' backwads an' forwads, wharever ther war a show fur fodder, an' an openin' fur a sport o' my size. I heerd ov Slaughter Bar, an' thort it'd suit my gait, so hyar I ar'. I want a show, that's all. Don't keer what. I've tried 'em all in my time. Ez fur talk, all I've heerd war at ther muzzle ov a revolver, so ter speak. I hev bin asleep hyar fur hours. Ef I hedn't 'a' bin, yer kin bet yer bottom dollar yer wouldn't 'a' caught hold with me at er disadvantage."

"It sounds like the truth," said the other, reflectively. "It might be the best thing to take you in. You would make a bright light on the snaffle lay. What say you, judge?"

"Run your own game," answered Schneider, a little sulkily. "I've nothing to do with you or your road-agents."

"That's so. Maybe you could use him to better advantage yourself."

"Perhaps I could."

"But I reckon yer won't. No, yer ain't ther sort er man I'd keer ter tie to. I go fur ther best every time; an' ther discount on you are purty heavy. Ef ther boss hyar wants a man, he kin have him. Ef he don't, what's ther use ov foolin'? He kin go his way, an' I kin go mine. From ther looks ov things I don't think I'll linger long at Slaughter Bar. It ain't no good place fur fun. Ef the openin' don't grow larger I'm off fur Mexico."

"I'm not so sure it's policy to let you go. I am satisfied that you are not the detective I was after, but I'm afraid you may be some one else."

"Allee lightey! Hold on, then, an' hedn't we better sit down awhile ter make ther job last longer? I'm not sufferin', an' when you quit mebbe I'll begin. I could stand yer a right smart of a wrastle now."

The man stood very much at his ease, and there was a great deal of truth in what he said, as the Bullion Boss was ready to acknowledge.

"That is so. This is boy's play, and it has all been pretty much of a mistake. We can cry quits until the next time we meet; but one thing I would like to know—what are you doing here asleep in the brush?"

As he spoke he carelessly loosened his hold and stepped backward a pace.

"That's not hard ter sling a reason fur. In that leetle game las' night I put me las' duckat on ther table. When ther lights went out then some galoot that wanted ter be smart raked in all ther antes an' left me shoal on ther bar. I treed ther wrong coon on it, too; an' so I steered for ther woods. I'm goin' ter look round this mornin', an' ef I don't find that galoot er an openin', I'll hev ter climb some travelin', j'ine ther agents, er starve."

"That's about the way to talk it. I see you're a real desperado. We hardly want you, for our number is about full; but I'll consider over it and let you know in a day or so. Meantime, here's something for a starter, and if you want to earn money watch the judge. If he should try to bolt plug him on the spot."

The Bullion Boss tossed the other a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"Is that a job?"

"It is if you want it."

"Then I'll take it, you bet. Jedge, I'm yer guardeean. Consider yerself watched, an' don't yer try no snide games with yer uncle Ezra. Oh, I'm ther baddest ov ther bad men from Bitter Creek, an' you kin spell it with big letters."

"Thank you for the information. I think I can take care of myself, though. One thing—is Buck Brandon a pard of yours? He was claiming something of the kind last night."

"Don't know ther critter from Adam. Reckon he's a fraud. He hauled in his horns too sudden when he heard my trump a-tootin' ter be a man ov sand. Mebbe you'd like me ter settle him. Kin take ther two jobs together an' save trouble."

"Not at present, not at present," answered the judge, hastily, and then added:

"I've nothing further to say. You are a dangerous man, and a marked man. If you stay at the Bar twenty-four hours you will, in addition, be a dead man. You hear me."

"And if you leave the Bar before I tell you to get out my men will hunt you up and hang you. You hear me?"

"And I reckon ther upshot 'll be Circus Pete 'll plug yer both. Good enough! I don't keer. Ef ther's nothin' else wanted I'm off fur ther Bar an' grub. You fellers ez hes hed yer breakfas' kin sot hyar till I get back, an', Boss, if yer want me, ye'll find me at ther Pilgrim's Pride at bash hours an' ther balance ov ther time at ther Alhambry, er some ov ther s'loons. Day-day! I'm goin' now."

Then this singular sport, having nodded and winked, went off down the gulch with a light, springy step, leaving the two men in doubt whether they had gained much by their interview.

"And now," said the Bullion Boss, as the man passed out of hearing distance, "if this was not the eavesdropper, who was and where was he?"

"I am puzzled, yet I'll swear it was not Clinton Bride's son. Sooner would I believe that it was Bride himself back from the other world. No, it was this Lightning Dick, who somehow eluded us. He has some game to play and he heard enough to help him. Henceforth he is dangerous."

"Yes, to both of us. He must die. I'll send the men in to-night to do the work—you see that Slaughter Bar don't rough them out. You are in for it now. Henceforth we work together. I will see you again. Good-day."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MAN ON THE MULE.

THE judge was not surprised at the hasty departure of the outlaw, since, at that moment, he heard the noise made by an approaching horseman, riding down the trail that led from the Hair Pin Lode.

He did not believe that it was on his own account that the Bullion Boss left so abruptly; but rather that, having said about all that he wished to say, at present he did not desire their interview to have another witness, whose word might be of more account at Slaughter Bar than that of the man who had just left them.

Hastily the judge scrambled up the bank; but finding that he could not reach the road in time to prevent the way by which he entered it from being seen, he remained crouched in a convenient clump of bushes.

The approaching horseman was nearly opposite to him before Judge Schneider had an opportunity to see what he looked like.

When he did see him he gave a great start, and came within an ace of losing his foothold and rolling down the bank.

"Gracious heaven! he almost exclaimed, though he kept the words from positive utterance. "It is Clinton Bride, himself."

And it turned out that the rider was mounted on a mule; a gray animal, sleek and spry, that was picking its way down the stony road with short but sure steps, apparently rather proud of the man on his back, who was a pale, undersized person, with a keen, black eye, and dark, flowing hair, whose head was bent downward as though in deep thought. His garments were worn and travel-stained, as though from a journey, and his pale face had the look of one who had passed through much suffering. There were lines of determination written there, too, as if he might be a dangerous man to meet when stirred by the remembrance of a wrong and faced by an enemy.

The judge regained his foothold, and looked more sharply at the advancing man, who would have to pass within a few paces of his covert.

It seemed to him that there was no mistake. Although the face was bent downward he could obtain a pretty fair view of it; and there was no mistaking its outline.

It was doubly familiar, too, since it was the face of Lightning Dick, with twenty-five years of suffering and experience added.

"The Missouri bottoms have given up their dead," thought the judge. "No flesh and blood is this, but a living soul. And yet I buried him with my own hands. He is here on the trail, after all these years, as desperate and vengeful as ever. If we meet face to face it will be his life or mine; why should I not try once more? Surely my hand has not lost its cunning because I have held it since I came to Slaughter Bar. They hardly suspect, then, what I have done, what I can do when reckless or at bay."

He drew his pistol again—the weapon which instinct ever brought to his hand and prudence stayed until it was too late.

The traveler came on; the judge leaned further forward. His face had not altogether lost its expression of astonishment and superstitious terror, yet there were hard lines beginning to form there, a wicked smile to curve around his lips.

"It was he all the time, and in his disguise I thought it was the son—even when I had heard his voice. That accounts for the mystery. When I had once heard him speak I was crazy to think it could be the boy, altered though the voice might be. When I knocked away the timbers in the Ground Hog shaft, at the risk of my own life, I settled for him forever. Now, hand and eye do your duty, and at last you are done with the Brides."

Yet it was not so easy to control the nerves that had received such a shock. His hand trembled as he softly cocked the weapon, and looked nervously out to see if the advancing man had noticed the slight sound.

The down-bent head never even started. The man on the mule advanced like a sheep to the slaughter. When he was nearly opposite the wavering wrist went up—and then dropped again.

"Curses on my coward nerves!" thought the man in ambush.

"I cannot hold the thing straight. Is it hate? or is it fear? I would miss him at ten feet; and then there would be no mistake as to what would become of me. I seem to see him not as he is; but just as he was when I struck him down with the spade, years ago in the moonlight."

The rider passed on. He might be a ghost from the grave for all the sign he gave. His hands dropped listlessly down, and the mule seemed to wander at will.

Then, suddenly, the nerves of the judge came back. He felt in his wrist the firmness of a rock, and he threw up his hand with his finger on the trigger.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the ghost; and then the laugh was cut short by the crack of a pistol.

But it was not the pistol of Judge Schneider that spoke.

It almost seemed as though the would-be assassin had been watched from the first, impossible as that appeared to be; and then a very miracle wound up the performance.

Just as the judge's weapon was rising into line there came from the man in the saddle the sepulchral laugh; and then without raising his head, or anything more than a lightning-like movement of his arm, he threw up his own weapon, which, unperceived, he had carried drawn, and fired.

Snap shot though it was, and, as far as mortal eye could see, utterly without aim, the bullet sped very true, striking the revolver of the judge just below the barrel, at the further end of the cylinder, where it wedged itself.

Away from the judge's hand flew his weapon, while he himself uttered one short howl, and pitching backward rolled heels over head and then head over heels, down the bank, into gulch.

As he disappeared the man on the mule clapped his heels to the sides of his animal and galloped down the trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

VERNON GOES OUT INTERVIEWING.

HARLEY VERNON, when he awoke the following morning, found the Bar quiet enough.

The fun and frolic of the night was over; the labors of the day had begun. In spite of the reputation of the place—its oceans of gin and its miles of graveyards—there was a great deal of solid work done there. The dancers fairly earned their money with which to pay the piper.

There were loungers about, however, and when he had had his breakfast he found no difficulty at all in obtaining an account of what had occurred at the Alhambra, after he had left it, though there was one little unexplained mystery on which he himself could have enlightened the natives if he had chosen to speak.

No one knew how Little Lide had escaped from the road-agents.

It seemed very strange to Vernon that such a band of men should overawe the town and after holding it at their mercy for some time and riding away with a citizen as a captive, should be suffered to depart with only a sigh of relief, no one seeming to dream of pursuit.

He expressed his opinion guardedly, and was met with a smile of pity.

"That's nothin'," said Nicodemus Mudge, the oracle of the Pride. "That's jist one ov his dog gone jokes. I opine yer don't know ther Bullion Boss. Foller him! Heavings an' yarth, what is ther ter foller? Ther on'y thing we're afeared on are that he won't go 'way. Ef he skips he'll leave 'bout ez much trail ez a flea—an' go ez lively. Ef he don't skip he'll let yer hear on him soon ernuf. More ner likely he'll be robbin' a mail forty miles from hyer ter-day. Then, ag'in, it's probable he's u' thar in ther mountings, whar er six-legged goat couldn't foller him, jist layin' out devilment by ther cord."

"But you don't mean to say that this outlaw can lay a whole town, and I might say a very brisk, wide-awake town, under contribution? Why, I thought this was the last place on earth such a thing could be done."

"Thankee, stranger, fur ther recommend; but ther sports ov Slaughter Bar are kinder under ther weather—sorter moultin'-like—an' hez dropped ther hackles under the infloons ov ther recomembrans ov what occurred las' week. An' then they ain't jist so sure who's a-standin' in with him."

"You mean—"

"Oh, I don't mean nothin'. Consider that a blind lead, an' knock out yer stulls fur a new stoppe. In course, fur Little Lide, ther boys would 'a' chipped in heavy; but otherwise ther safest plan are ter hold yer edge till yer see what the other hands are goin' ter do."

Other speakers had taken about the same view as Mudge; but he gave the young Englishman an idea; and after a few careless inquiries he sauntered out. The dashing girl who seemed such a general favorite had interested him greatly before; and the fact of his having been able to do her a service brought her still nearer. He took a sudden notion to see her by daylight, and he wandered away in the direction of the store kept nominally by John Oaks; but in which it was generally understood that she had no small interest.

The establishment was open, and doing a desultory sort of business. When Vernon entered Oaks was invisible, and there was no one present but the young lady behind the counter.

And Little Lide was one who did not suffer by the full glare of daylight. She was, if anything, handsomer now than when seen by the light of the candles, in the great hall of the Alhambra.

Vernon noted that she gave him a keen glance as he entered; and that her revolvers were right at hand, ready for instant use.

She evidently had no intention of using them.

On the contrary a beam of positive sunshine overspread her countenance at sight of his face, and, springing to her feet, she leaned over the little counter with outstretched hand.

"Don't you go another step; put it right thar, pard. You're a brick an' I'm another. Between us we made things lively for the boys last night. Shake, pard! I owe you one; and when Little Lide says that, she means it, and nothing shorter."

Vernon was a little surprised at the free-and-easy nature of the address. In looking at her handsome face he had forgotten that she was the acknowledged pet of Slaughter Bar. In repose there was nothing that was bold or wicked about her features; but, on the contrary, there was an intelligence and refinement

about them that seemed strangely out of place just there.

Certainly he had never clasped a softer little hand than that which met his answering pressure with a steady grasp.

Perhaps he looked somewhat confused, for the girl gave utterance to a clear, ringing little laugh.

"Oh, you needn't play modest. When any one stacks up his checks on my lay-out I generally know who plants them there. If it hadn't been for you last night I wouldn't be here this A. M. The way you plugged that quadruped was just too sweet for anything."

Then Vernon laughed, too. Gushing girls are pretty much the same all the world over, and he felt that he was getting on his own ground.

"You and I seem to share a secret between us. I wouldn't claim any merit, but when it's thrust upon me I don't see why I should be bashful. Yet don't give me credit for more than I deserve. My intentions were good—none better ever existed—but it was a special providence that my blundering shot didn't make things worse instead of better. When I knew what I had done I actually shivered at the thought of what I hadn't done. Yet one thing I would like to know."

"Propel, my friend. What I can't tell isn't worth the knowing."

"How, then, did you recognize me as the lucky individual of last night?"

"A pair of cat's eyes, that can see in the dark, helped me out on that. I ran away like a fine fellow; but I didn't go very far. When I got where I had a chance to make the trump I held on and kept you in sight. I don't go back on my friends and leave them in hock. So I saw that it was the Englishman I had noticed at the Alhambra, and that you got safely off to the Pilgrim's Pride. After that I had just time to get to my ranch before the boys were pounding at the door."

"Very true. Just so it might all happen, and no doubt it did. I had noted you at the saloon, also; and half thought I recognized your voice when I took the snap-shot at the runaway outlaw. But I had no idea of being recognized when I came in here, though I had hoped that I might obtain some information."

"As to what?"

The girl spoke shortly and sharply, and at the same time threw down upon the counter a box of collars. It was not likely that they would remain long without interruption. It was necessary to talk fast and be ready for any casual caller.

"I am here, perhaps, on a wild-goose chase, as I have already remarked. You have guessed rightly when you say that I am an Englishman. To my own hurt, perhaps, I am looking for some relatives."

"A good place to search for them—what in heaven's name brought you to Slaughter Bar?"

"The dying confession of a villain gave me the idea for the search; after that had begun some one else suggested this section as being one that might repay me for a prospecting tour."

"And how does it strike you since you have taken a look at the ground?"

"I confess I scarcely know where to begin; and I have not been here long enough to make much head-way through that blundering chance that has always aided me more than my brains. Yet I have seen a party that might possibly be the man."

"And the first letter of his name is Judge Schneider. Good enough! What does he say about it? and what answer did the pretty Nellie give when you broached the subject of cousinly relation last night?"

Harley Vernon was too much surprised to answer at once. Why should she have picked out the judge?

"You don't want to answer. That is right, too."

"No; you are only mistaken. I have said nothing to any one. I am not anxious to help set up a fraud; and this matter requires to be handled carefully—for certain reasons that I do not care to explain. Yet I do not mind confiding in you. Judge Schneider, as he is called here, is the man, and I am in doubt whether to approach him or not. I might make a mistake—or he may know everything I have to tell him and still prefer to keep dark. Do you know anything about him?"

"Precious little; and the little that I do know is no good. I might tell you more about Miss Nellie if I chose. She is a little lady,

anyhow, if we don't speak. Two queens, you see, at Slaughter Bar could hardly be on amicable terms."

"Why not, if the reigning monarchs preside over different kingdoms? You should parcel out your different subjects. But tell me. I feel strangely inclined to confide in you. What would you advise? How shall I best obtain the confidence of this man, so as to satisfy myself of his identity, without exposing my hand?"

Little Lide raised her eyebrows with a comical grimace.

"How shall you reach the North Pole, or find Utopia? my friend, you are proposing more than there is in the wood. All that can't be done. You might find out who he is, but you won't do it from him; and I reckon, whether he is awake or asleep, a tiger is not the confidential sort of an animal for a youth to fool around. The judge is a bad man and it will depend upon his interests whether you get away from here alive or not. If you do he will have squeezed you dry, every time."

"Good enough advice perhaps; but you can hardly expect me to take it when I have crossed an ocean and a continent to meet him. No, I must investigate—and as I am working for his interest, if he be the man I suspect, he certainly ought to meet me as a friend."

"He is more dangerous as a friend than a foe if I have read him right. Better let him rest in peace and try another lead. There's the Bullion Boss, now. He's a likely man to tell you all you want; and safer to fool around."

"What? the road-agent; the outlaw?"

"That is the man; and I tell you I am in solid earnest. When you get through with him you'll own it too."

"Thanks. But I'm not anxious to push confidences in that direction. Legitimate expenses are heavy enough without paying tribute to a gentleman who calls himself the boss of the road."

"My friend, when you go out to shear don't carry any wool of your own with you. Then, if you come home empty-handed, you've only lost your time. The fact is, I'm inclined to help you; but I don't want you to interfere with my game. Take advice, and remain quiet at the Pilgrim's Pride, looking around as though you wanted to invest here. The judge will suspect you of course. Then he will either show his hand, or waste his time watching you. In either case, if you happen into any danger Little Lide, who owes you one, will be around."

The advice seemed good, though Harley Vernon heard it with a feeling of disappointment. He had hoped for some more definite information, though from the vague way he had expressed himself he could hardly expect it.

He bowed and answered:

"Thanks; but I hope I will not need your kind offices in that way. I shall, for the present at least, do as you say. I cannot tell you more without going into a long story, that I am not altogether certain you should hear. Yet I hope to meet you again, and until that time—good-day."

He made a small purchase, and turned to withdraw.

Just then Howlin' Billy, a shade more dilapidated than usual came slinking into the room. He held in his hand a crumpled note, and stared around in a wooden sort of way as he held the paper forward exclaiming, "Copper-heads an' coal ile, you're ther chicken!"

CHAPTER XIX.

VERNON WHILE IN DOUBT WITNESSES A NEW ARRIVAL.

VERNON took the note from the hand of the battered old man, and glanced doubtfully at the superscription.

If words went for anything it was undoubtedly for him, since he saw his name written in a very fair hand.

He opened it in some surprise and read the contents, which ran something like this:

"You are here on a mission that may mean harm to some one of your name however honest you may be. If you want to learn the true facts in the matter which you are probably tracing up meet the bearer of this at the western end of town, to-night at nine o'clock. He will take you to one who can put you down to the bed-rock. If you have any doubts leave your money and bring your revolvers. But above all things say nothing of this to any one and after you have read this return it to the bearer, who knows nothing, and to whom say nothing."

"A FRIEND."

Vernon grew thoughtful as he concluded reading this note. It might be a *bona fide* offer; it might be a trap. No answer was needed; and all questions seemed useless. He looked over the paper again and then handed it back to Howlin' Billy.

The hero from Black Dam made a wry face as he received it. Then he gravely tore it into strips, and placing it in his mouth, after a little mastication, tried to swallow it.

Little Lide looked from one to the other, and then, thoroughly amused by the grave look on each face, burst into a ringing laugh.

"Whatever the contents of the note may have been, there's not a doubt but Billy here has the worst part for his. Here, old man, wash it down."

She threw out a tumbler and set up a bottle with which John Oak was accustomed to cautiously treat his favorite patrons, and the old loafer was not slow to take advantage of the invitation. Floating in a brimming tumbler of whisky, the paper went down without further hitch or hesitation.

"Thankee, miss; you've an eye fur an ole sinner. Ef that bug-juice don't prove his eternal salvation he's dead gone bu'sted. Mornin' to yer, an' hyar's hopin' biz'll call me this way ag'in."

His eyes were fixed on the decanter as he spoke, and his head never moved, though under it his shoulders turned around slowly in a semicircle, as though the connection worked castor-wise.

Little Lide raised the bottle and let the amber fluid drop slowly into the glass in a trickling stream, glancing during the operation from it to the old man and back again.

It was deliberate temptation. The shoulders turned back; the eyes set in an appealing look.

Vernon saw the two glances and smiled. He caught another from the girl, that was cast at him, and smiled again. It said as plainly as possible, "If you want me to sound him, get out."

He understood, and, nodding, vanished; though not before he had noted a satisfied gleam in her eye.

"What she don't worm from him will hardly be worth the knowing," thought the young man, as he strode away. "And what she finds out, I'll know later on in the day."

As yet he had come to no decision in regard to what he would do in the matter of the meeting asked for; but he had a number of hours in which to make up his mind, and he went slowly on toward the end of the camp, thus unwittingly passing the judge's residence.

At the edge of the town he was passed by a man on a mule; and even in the careless glance he cast at him he thought he recognized the handsome young sport who had helped carry on the disturbance at the Alhambra the night before.

"In the way of a partner, I judge he wouldn't be a bad man to pick up. I wonder what he wants here. He looks like a man with a purpose, too. If I can meet him this afternoon I might sound him, for I begin to think I am the merest tyro alongside of these people, and this Judge Schneider requires to be approached carefully. If he is my man, I don't see why there should be any antagonism between us, but one can't most always sometimes tell. From all accounts he was rather a desperate man in his youth, and I guess a lifetime spent in such associations as these has hardly made him any better. Of course he must know who I am, and it's more than likely he suspects my errand. It is a delicate subject to broach; and yet, perhaps, I should have gone to him the first thing this morning. He may not—of course does not—know anything of the new developments, and if he should happen to declare war, he could make it both unpleasant and dangerous. Perhaps I had better turn right now, and see if I can find him. If he is at home, half an hour would settle the business, one way or the other."

So impressed was he with this idea that he instantly wheeled about, and took half-a-dozen steps toward the judge's house before the memory of the note lately received came into his head.

"Ah, that's it. It is anything like even money that you choose to put up that the judge's hand is in that. Evidently he wants to feel his way carefully; and I'd be foolish if I didn't humor his bent. He would have a distrust of me in the very outset if I didn't. I'll do just as he says; and he will open his eyes very wide when he hears the

truth. And meantime, for fear that he may suspect the honesty of my intentions, I will go back to the Pilgrim's Pride and keep quiet for the remainder of the day. I had better not be seen doing the agreeable to either the charming Miss Nellie, or the fascinating Little Lide, though the two girls seem to have hold of different ends of the same mystery."

As he went by the judge's house he looked up at it sharply, but saw no sign of its inmates. The fact was that the judge was up at the Hair Pin; and Miss Nellie was down-town taking a constitutional. Vernon saw nothing of either of them on his way to the Pride.

When he reached that haven of rest, however, he found that things were a great deal more lively than when he had left, and from what he heard there he judged there was a hundred per cent. more excitement further on, down about the Alhambra.

The cause of the excitement was two-fold. The Bar was waking up to a sense of the indignity that had been put upon it by the various strangers who had made their appearance the night before; and in addition there was a well-grounded rumor that a wonderful strike had been made at the Hair Pin. And as the mine was defended against entrance with as much vigor as if it were a Government fortification, no one thought it worth while to go out to see for himself, but all trusted to being able, that night, to worm something out of any of the men who might happen in, though they were the sort of hair-pins that didn't have much to say. Taken altogether, circumstances had combined to waken up the Bar once more, and, as Nicodemus Mudge had it, "Ther cloud hez rolled over, ther moonlight hez riz, an' Slaughter Bar goes 'round on wheels."

So much interested was everybody in matters of local concern that the stage arrived and deposited its living cargo without the usual manifestation of curiosity upon the part of every one within half a mile of the Pride.

As Vernon was not, however, so intent on these topics, he had eyes for the coach and its contents, and he smiled as he saw the one sole passenger disgorged.

The passenger was a female, and an Irish female, too, with a corporosity that was certainly scarcely less than two hundred pounds avoirdupois; and a broad, red face that showed traces of intelligence nevertheless.

At the very moment that she disembarked and cast her twinkling gray eyes shrewdly around, Miss Nellie Schneider came sailing along.

At sight of her the Irishwoman gave a start, and then suddenly swooped down upon the young lady with outstretched arms, exclaiming in joyful tones:

"Och, sure an' praise be wid all the saints, but it's me own little girrul that I foinde the firruth thry! It wor no mistake that touned me fate fur Slaughter Bar, but ther blestidest av chances. Och! Molly dear, come to me arrums!"

Vernon felt that he was peculiarly fortunate in that he was, at that moment, looking straight at the face of Miss Nellie. Such a look of intense disdain it had never before been his lot to see, as the young lady, with a rapid motion swept away from the intended clutch, and sailed on up the street, leaving the Irishwoman seemingly as much puzzled as angry at the haughty sneer with which her advances were received.

"Thry ag'in, darlint; sure it's a quality girrul, an' the daughter o' the joodge yer talkin' to."

The laughing voice of Lightning Dick sounded in her ear, and the woman wheeled with a flush on her face and anger in her eye. The handsome sport was just passing in company with one of the Circus Petes. She opened her mouth, and Vernon expected a torrent of abuse. What was his surprise at seeing her fall back with a look of actual terror on her face.

"Howly saints presarve us!" she exclaimed. "Be the rock o' Cashel, it's the ither one!"

The words were not loud enough, apparently, to reach the ears of the two sports, for they passed on without answer or delay, while no one but Vernon seemed to have noticed the brief bit of comedy and its ending.

At another time he would have thought no more of it; but just now his eyes were wide open for anything and everything, and he scented a mystery that might have some bearing on his own affairs. He stepped forward now as polite as a candidate for Congress in a

doubtful district; and it was under his escort that she entered the Pilgrim's Pride.

In the course of a very few moments he had made so favorable an impression that the two were talking quite confidentially together; and though he could not quite understand the drift of her story, Vernon was possessed with the idea that he was on the high-road to a revelation.

Meantime, Lightning Dick and his partner passed on down the street, Circus Pete doing a great deal of talking in a low tone, while the other listened in interested silence. Neither appeared to give a second thought to the Irishwoman.

"I'll bet my head for a foot-ball that ther two will try ter play it low down on each other; but you kin stake all yer duckats they'll both be very square in goin' fur you, an' ef we're 'round this byar burg ter-night we kin have jist all ther fun we want fur both ov us. Ef we want ter git in our work an' thin 'em out from the start, there couldn't be a better time ter begin, me backin' your game, an' you standin' up fur mine. But I don't like the idee ov yer comin' in arter ther music's begun. Mebbe it's a woman ez writ yer ter stay away till after nine, an' mebbe it's a handsome woman; but I'd bet a handful ov slugs she wears whiskers. This chap they call Buck Brandon ar' spreadin' 'round town ter-day, swearin' he's a chief an' are goin' ter show it, an' frum what I heard an' know he's an agent, an' partly my meat. Ef he hes backin' an' sand he may rake yer pile. Are yer sure ov yer gript?"

Lightning Dick made no verbal answer. He only smiled, shook his head and waved his hand.

He meant, go your way and I will go mine. I can take care of myself, and men like Buck Brandon are nothing to me.

A little further on they separated.

CHAPTER XX.

ONE CIRCUS PETE STRIVES TO EARN HIS WAGES.

THERE was as much truth as poetry in the rumor in regard to the strike at the Hair Pin. It had been made, and it was very rich. When Sandy McQuoid met him he was so full of his intelligence that he had no eyes for the judge's apparel and confused looks; and after he had imparted his intelligence, that was enough to account for everything.

Yet, after the singular experiences of the morning, Schneider was scarcely in condition to properly rejoice, for, try as he would, he could not help but fancy that there were toils gathering around him that one day soon he might dash himself against in vain.

As he listened to his foreman, however, his hopes began to revive and strengthen. Here, without need of further plotting or adventure, was the fortune for which he had struggled and sinned. It might be less than a million, to be sure; but then, it might be more. With that behind him, what need to carry out a scheme that he had been working up, which would bring him wealth and an excuse to leave the country?

The trouble was that he had started the ball to rolling, and now it was not so easy to bid it stop. And though he was not afraid of the Bullion Boss, since he was an outlaw about whose disposition in any, otherwise, unorthodox way he need have no hesitation, he was most unpleasantly affected by the presence of two men—Lightning Dick and the one Circus Pete. The one was a detective who probably had a clew; the other was an avenger who would strike him in spite of his millions. To get rid of them he was perfectly willing to employ the hand of the outlaw.

Then there was something else that would need rearranging. This daughter of his, who had lately joined him from the boarding-school, where for so many years she had been domiciled—she would be an heiress, but in a different way.

Right there he thought of Harley Vernon, and ground his teeth. He was another unnecessary adjunct of the play, and yet how was he to be disposed of? The judge spent an hour or two at the mine, and then departed.

As he passed the spot where he had interviewed the several parties he looked anxiously around, but saw no traces of any of them. When he had reached the bend in the road there was a man sitting on a rock that had hitherto been hidden from view, and a single glance told him that it was the Circus Pete

whom he and the outlaw had captured asleep in the bushes.

"I'm 'round ag'in, an' ye'll generally find me 'round," he remarked, as Judge Schneider came near. "I've got my eye on yer, an' I'll keep it thar ez long ez me side-pardner, ther Bullion Boss, keeps it thar. Ef yer want me ter plug Buck Brandon I kin carry that contract, too. Fur ther futur' call me Pete Mahone. Ther's too many Circus Petes on ther trail, an' I don't want no mistake. Pass on, now. It won't do fur us two to be seen a-talkin' together too free."

"You don't mean to say—"

"That I'm a-watchin' ov ye? You bet. That's my name. Go whar you will, Pete Mahone 'll be round. Pass on."

The judge recognized the threat and went by. There was no use to argue with this man, and this was not the place to try to bribe him. He was another complication of which he had not thought. In his present schemes he was a grain of sand which might disarrange the delicate machinery without his presence being recognized until too late.

When the judge got home Miss Nellie was out, and he had the house to himself. He tried to think, and the effort was a failure. When he went to the window there was Pete Mahone in the distance, idling around, watching the house.

After a little Nellie came in.

There was a preoccupied look on her face, and she would have passed straight to her attic if the judge had not confronted her.

"Just as I said, Nellie. It took nerve to follow it up, but the end came around all right. We've struck it rich at the Hair Pin, and there's a million in sight."

"Well?"

"You don't realize, then, what opens out for us. With a million in sight we can bond the mine for an unlimited amount. Why, there's no end to the wealth that is to be gathered in. I can make a stock company that will be solid, dividend-paying, and sell shares up to five millions. When once we get things in fair running order Slaughter Bar will scarcely hold me long. I've had a lifetime of hard work; I'm going to have a few years of pleasure now."

"And what is to become of me?"

"What a question! Are you not my daughter?"

"Am I?"

At this point-blank question the judge hesitated just the least fraction of time.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. I asked because the only evidence of the fact seems to be your word. I have a woman's curiosity. You paid my way at the pension for an indefinite number of years, but in all that time you never came to see me once. I wouldn't invest much on your natural affection. At last, when it seemed to suit your hand, you came, and in an under-hand sort of way got possession of me. You are the man that paid the bills—how do I know that you are my father?"

"Girl, you are asking your questions too soon. Wait until we have bid good-by to Slaughter Bar, and perhaps to the continent. Then we will go over the facts together, and I can tell you who I really am, and who you are. For the present it is best that you should know nothing. And yet, lest you may misunderstand me, I can and should tell you this much. Years ago, when I was young and confiding, a man who was near and dear to me—we will say a bosom friend—committed a great crime, and in trying to save him I became involved in the meshes."

"Since then I have lived, more or less, the life of a hunted man; for there were great people, who, if they could have found me, would have pushed me to the wall. Meantime your future has always been provided for as well as it could be managed from the time you were placed, an infant almost, in the hands of the woman who afterward left you at the school."

"Now it seems as though the hours of trial were about over. I understand there have been developments which show my innocence, and I could boldly claim the fortune that I abandoned to save my life. Whether I will submit to the vexations of such a course remains to be seen. In any event we will drop, as rapidly as possible, all connection with these people about us, and as soon as our affairs can be arranged we will go out into the world to live and enjoy."

"A very grand future; but it doesn't answer the question: 'Who am I?'"

He looked at her earnestly. Why was she so anxious to know? He had been too full of his other affairs to suspect; now he began to consider. Some one must have been talking with her lately. A flush of anger appeared on his face, though he spoke calmly enough:

"You are speaking parrot-like; who has been talking to you?"

"No one!—Yes, I am mistaken! An Irish-woman who came in on the stage tried to. I think she would have embraced me if I had given her the chance. She called me 'Molly, dear,' in a way that quite went to my heart. I passed on, leaving her rooted to the spot. Was that a mistake? Perhaps you can tell me who she may be?"

"I cannot. Certainly that was some ridiculous mistake. Never mind. I cannot expect you to have every confidence in me at once, but only be patient. In time you can read my heart aright. After that you will no longer have a doubt."

"That will be a dangerous time for me," muttered Nellie, under her breath, as she turned away. She liked the judge less than ever in his affectionate moods. She doubted him most then, though fortunately, she never feared him.

A little after dark the judge rose up and prepared to go out. As he buckled his belt around him he remarked:

"Am I to have your company to-night, or have you recovered your senses and decided to stay at home?"

"No Alhambra for me to-night," she answered, decidedly.

"And why not, my dear?"

He was rather amused at the vigor of her tone.

"Oh, I could stand Slaughter Bar, for I know the most of the men like, and the rest of them know me, and they wouldn't shoot my way for a fortune. But these strangers—these bad men from Bodie and Bitter Creek and the rest—ah, they touched the Bar lightly last night, but it seems to me I smell murder in the air every time I think of them. Not any of them for me, if you please. I'll stay at home until they leave the town."

"They're not as dangerous as they look," answered the judge, somewhat surprised at her apparent nervousness. "These jugglers with their trick shots, and all that, hardly ever pan out well for real, hard, solid work. Slaughter Bar has better men than any of them, as they will probably soon find out."

"I'll take your word for it; but when you find them let me know. Good-night, and look out for your precious neck. I'm not ready to be an heiress yet, and remember, if anything should happen to you I would fall heir to the Hair Pin Lode, and its big bonanza."

He started as though bitten by a snake, then went hastily out. That was a contingency of which he had never thought before.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DANGEROUS DOUBLE.

AFTER reaching the outside the judge hesitated.

He had said very little about the dance at the Alhambra, and Nellie had seemed inclined to say less, but somehow he distrusted the girl to-night.

Probably her last words had put him on his guard.

He reasoned that if she insisted on going to the saloon the evening before, when, by waiting twenty-four hours, she could have gone incognito, it was not without reason. Under his guidance she had learned the lay of the land, and was able to explore it still further alone.

It only took the judge a moment to make up his mind.

He walked briskly down the road and returned quietly along by the rear of the house. If Nellie was going to make a move of any kind, he wanted to find out its nature. Then he could keep her under surveillance, or sternly interfere. He knew his own house well enough to execute his maneuvers successfully.

He had not been mistaken either; but what he saw through a loop-hole in the shutters made his heart almost stand still.

In front of the looking-glass, stood the tall, Juno-like girl, with a queer smile on her face, and her form clad in a well-fitting suit of black velvet, that was spangled here and there with a button that flashed like gold; while

drawn low down over her brow was the broad brim of a white sombrero.

She was almost the exact counterpart of the Lightning Dick who had appeared at the Alhambra the night before. When, with a short, little laugh, she applied a black mask to her face and stepped back with folded arms, it would have taken a keen eye to have distinguished that she was only a counterfeit of that magic marksman.

The judge recognized the resemblance on the instant.

"Good heavens! the girl must be mad and bent on her own destruction. In that garb she will be taken for the strange young sport and shot, unless he comes in his own proper person. Even in that case, the risks are awful. I must warn her, or insist. She has had the costume made and never thinks of giving it up, probably never realized the danger. Yet it is unpleasant to interfere, and I cannot do it here. It would be too ridiculous."

While he was considering the question, standing with his eyes cast down in thought, he lost his chance, for there suddenly sounded in his ears the near rattle of horse's hoofs, and looking up he saw a dark figure galloping away. When he applied his eye again to the peep-hole the girl had vanished.

"That settles it," he muttered. "She has gone to the Alhambra, and I must follow her. She shall not come to harm if I can help it."

Hesitating no longer he hastened away.

It was altogether a matter of choice, in regard to disguise at these masked balls. Those that had old scores to settle, either on the creditor or debtor side, preferred to go in some unrecognizable garb; and though the costumes were none too elegant, as the half of Slaughter Bar belonged to one class or the other, and a good share of the balance was of the sex feminine, which adores mystery, the majority of the attendants at the Terpsichorean revels came thoroughly disguised.

The judge had a costume prepared and in keeping at a shanty down the street. He slipped quietly in, and when he reappeared on the street, few would have recognized him in the burly monk, with the firm stride, so unlike his usual cat-like step.

At the Alhambra he found the candles were again blazing on the rude chandelier; the musicians were working away on their elevated platform; the room, around the walls, was filled with a motley throng, while the open space left for the dancers was occupied by twenty whirling figures—the waltzing at the Alhambra was at times rude—it was always energetic.

The monk looked over the floor; and grinned under his mask. There were five other monks, and they were all as like in appearance as half-a-dozen peas.

Another trick of the Bar.

The chances were five to one if anybody began settling up he would hit the wrong man—that was, the wrong man for him. As each man at the Bar was more or less hunted by some one waiting for time and place, and as each rather suspected that he himself was wanted worst of all, his logic was applied only to his own affairs, or he might have seen that after all the chances were about even.

The judge looked anxiously around, but could see nothing of Nellie, although she had had time to arrive. He stood leaning up against the bar, and finally turned to the masked man behind it, speaking in a coarse, guttural voice:

"Yer haven't seen nothin' ov ther fancy leetle sport, as chipped in on ther Circus Petes las' night? I thort mebbe he'd be 'round an' I could hunt him."

"Nary leetle sport; but ef yer want him real bad I reckon he won't be hard ter find. When yer get him keep him—ef yer can."

The answering voice was as clearly disguised as his own. It was not Engine Jack that spoke, and that was all that Judge Schneider could be certain of. As the man turned away to wait on a customer, the judge gave a sideways glance—and saw the muzzle of a derringer peeping out from the sleeve of one of his counterparts. The little steel tube pointed full and square at him.

"Go slow, judge; I've got yer kivered, an' me name are Pete Mahone. Keep yer tool in yer boots, yer lip in yer pocket, an' don't meddle with ther sport from Bodie. Ther boss an' me 'll tend ter that. An' keep yer paws offer me fur I'm heeled to ther nozzle, an' er bad man ter mount. See?"

With his other hand Circus Pete slightly pushed aside his robe, and showed a belt bristling with knives and revolvers.

"*Pax vobiscum!*" broke in another voice, as harsh as any of them. "Hyar's richness! Six ov us at ther Alhambry on er dance night, 'ste'd ov at home, sayin' our paters. Whar yer think we'll die when we go to? Eh! But when ther frolic begins we'll warm 'em up, won't we, Pete? I tell yer I've got eyes open, an' I'm fixed for fun."

It was the other Circus Pete; and as he made the familiar movement with his left hand he showed the same array of belted weapons.

While he spoke a masker entered from the further door—that led into the smaller room—and as the judge saw, he started. Was it Nellie, or was it Lightning Dick?

Of course no one else had any doubts, though the sharpest eye could not see behind the black mask. There was the costume of black velvet, and the white sombrero, and the familiar beltful of firearms.

This advent stirred up a ripple of excitement. Nearly every one had an idea that if the three strangers showed up there would be a good chance for music in the air, and there were plenty who had imbibed sufficiently to be well primed for work.

The sport in black velvet glided into the circle of the dancers, and his arm was around the waist of a partner whom every one recognized, spite of mask and domino, as Little Lide.

The young lady had the reputation of being the best waltz r that had ever entered the Alhambra, and there were few men at the bar who would not have backed her for all they were worth, as a fashionable dancer against any one west of the Rockies. There might be girls that could show more vigor, or execute more pirouettes, but they were professionals. They danced recklessly, for profit; she danced in a womanly way, for pleasure.

For once she had a partner worthy of her, and 'round and 'round the two spun, in perfect time and motion, until the musicians stopped to rest. Then the girl took the arm of her partner, and strolled away, halting at last very near to Judge Schneider, who had left his post of observation and mingled with the crowd. He was listening with all his ears, and heard Little Lide:

"No, don't thank me. You are a man in a million. I'd spend a few dollars just to keep you where I could have you. In the name of creation and the rest, where did you come from?"

The figure in black bowed gracefully. That was all the answer, but the movement was so grandly made that it seemed sufficient. The little lady was not offended at the silence.

"It's hardly worth while to warn you, for I judge that you are able to take care of yourself; but you must know there is trouble brewing. Look out for yourself. You have a few friends here; and a great many enemies. You seemed to want to make the last—why I do not know—and you have been successful. Yet I sometimes think our hands are intended to be played together. When you are sure it's so let me know, and we'll name the game. Ta, ta. I can't stand still forever, and there's Fowler Wilson looking for me—a good young man, and solid."

The young lady moved off toward the person indicated, and at the same instant the judge slipped up closer to the supposed Lightning Dick, and twitched lightly the black velvet sleeve nearest to him.

"In heaven's name, what are you doing here? This is no place for you. Don't you know that they will take you for the man you represent, and go for you, tooth and nail? The pitiful coward was afraid to come himself; and that leaves you without a chance."

The judge spoke low but earnestly. Instead of answer the dark eyes turned to the clock, where the hands pointed to a few minutes of nine, yet undoubtedly the words had been heard.

"Perhaps she is too agitated—too frightened to speak now that she recognizes the error," thought Schneider. "I must act for her."

He would have clasped the arm that had been drawn from his touch, but it was suddenly drawn away, as its owner turned and hurried away.

And then came the very catastrophe he was seeking to avert. A burly form planted itself squarely in front of the slither one, while a harsh voice exclaimed:

"You'd waltz right over ther sports ov Slaughter Bar, would yer? Not while this hyar rooster's round, trimmed an' heeled. Draw er drop yer hackles. I'm goin' ter try yer sand; an' it's me, Kiddy Klyde, thet's shoutin' to yer."

Then, from different sides, other toughs closed in, and the Lightning Sport stood in the midst of the circle, still voiceless, and with hands on revolvers, ready to draw, but with an upraised, shining knife poised above his breast.

CHAPTER XXII.

BODIES FOR BREAKFAST.

A HUSH fell upon the room, and every eye was turned eagerly toward the spot. It was a matter of interest to see the man who was willing to take the risk of opening hostilities—especially when the singular fact is mentioned, that the actual and original "Kiddy" Klyde had been dead a month. Perhaps this duplicate would follow in his wake; and perhaps not. He certainly held the advantage just now.

The knife did not at once descend.

For that there was good reason, since even Slaughter Bar would not stand a public assassination of an unresisting man; and the way public opinion manifested itself was with an immediate bullet.

There were two courses open for the young

He might attempt to draw; then down would come the knife.

He might throw up his hands, which was probably what Kiddy Klyde was playing for; and after that he would have little reputation for sand, and no social standing at the Bar.

In either case he would be disposed of; and then would come the turns of the Circus Petes who had put upon the place the same affronts.

"Don't you draw! don't you draw!" exclaimed the judge, warningly, and he was about to step forward when one of the monks slid directly in front of him.

"Keep out, judge; I'm a-lookin' after you, an' it ain't your chip. I'll hev to see yer through, an' I might salt down ther wrong men."

This was what Pete Mahone said; but at the same time there was the unmistakable sound of the cocking of a pistol to his right. The other Circus Pete was watching the affair from under his cowl, with an eye intent on business.

Meantime the dark eyes of the threatened sport were gazing unwaveringly into those of "Kiddy" Klyde, and suddenly and unseen his fingers opened.

Down to the floor dropped something with a light thud; and just in time, with a graceful bound, the intended victim sprang back.

There was the sound of a slight explosion; and then, covering the retreat, a little sheet of flame shot up, followed by a thick column of smoke, that quickly enlarged, and for the moment obscured everything from view, while the air was dense with a horrible odor that sent everybody rushing from the spot.

Evidently the party in the white hat had been prepared for some such emergency, and had used a weapon more potent than a pistol, and one with which the Bar had had little or no experience.

Kiddy Klyde received the full benefit of both fire and smoke. He dropped the knife from his hand and staggered back, while a chorus of coughs and oaths arose from those nearest. Those who were so fortunate as to have a back seat were startled at first, but were inclined to laugh, though a few of the timid ones did make a movement for the door.

For three or four minutes everything was in confusion. Then the smoke cleared away, the terrible stench began to be more endurable, and people began to look more sharply around to see what was to follow.

Apparently nothing.

The little sport had disappeared, white hat, velvet coat, gold buttons, revolvers, and all. No one knew exactly how he had gone, but public opinion rather pitched upon the window as his means of exit. That seemed the convenient and much-used avenue of escape. Maybe there were two or three who could have told, but they held their peace.

Klyde was furious at his disappointment and over the ridiculous figure he had cut.

"An' that's ther kind ov a sport ez wants ter shine round ther Alhambry. Dog-gone his mangey top-knot, I knowed he didn't hev ther

sand. Hyar's ther stickin' plaster ez shut his mouth up. When a man tackled him right close he war all smoke, and he danced outer ther winder. It's good fer him he left, I tell yer, boycees. Slaughter Bar ain't got no furdur use fur Lightnin' Dick!"

"Ye'd better sing er leetle smaller, Kiddy. He may be skimp ov nerve, but get him started an' he's a desprit shuter."

The interruption came in a mocking voice, that was almost a taunt.

"Oh, I never took water for ar'y two-legged mule on this hyar footstool, an' I ain't afeard ov him. I ain't no fancy shot, but I kin draw an' plug with ther next one, an' ef yer don't believe it, trot him out. Yer thought he war a boss, didn't yer? But whar is he now? He ain't frolicking round this stub-horned ram ov ther Rockies."

"Don't be too sure of that, Kiddy. I think he's coming now."

A voice from near the door was raised in interruption, and Klyde turned in wrath.

But just then the clock sounded the hour of nine, and on the stroke, through the doorway, with careless swing, came the Lightning Sport, masked and heeled.

"Cut an' co' again!" remarked the cheerful tones that were already so well known to the Bar.

"You've come back, hev yer?" shouted the man with the knife, as he shook the blade in the air. "Then, dog-gone yer, yer my meat. Stand up ter this hyar rack if yer want er taste ov ther fodder ez grows at Slaughter Bar."

"Look out for his other hand, Dick!" interrupted another voice, that sounded like the judge's thinly disguised.

The warning was not unprofitable, for Klyde had his left hand in his side pocket and these words showed his intention.

While daring the Sport on with the brandished knife, he intended to shoot him as he advanced with the concealed derring.

A very pretty little plan, though so cowardly that it might not have been suspected if one pair of eyes had not noticed his quick motions.

The words disconcerted the would-be assassin. Between them there were half a dozen moving forms, and behind a swarm of dark faces. At that distance it took a certain marksman to risk a shot that must be aimed high, and had to be deadly. He had to act at once or give up his plan—and he chose the former. His wrist turned, and there was an almost imperceptible movement of the skirt of his coat.

Then came two sharp reports, just a shade apart, if, indeed, they did not blend with each other.

The road between the two was not altogether clear. Klyde waited an instant and Lightning Dick did not, but threw the muzzle of his ready revolver forward and raised his thumb.

The bullet cut through between Klyde's fingers, struck the hilt of his knife, and glancing, entered his head, felling him to the floor, while the derring in his pocket exploded, and the blade dropped beside him with an angry clang.

Immediately upon his shot, Lightning Dick sprang forward, a pistol in either hand. Brushing recklessly through the crowd, and stooping over the prostrate man, he tore away the mask, revealing the face of Buck Brandon, the first of the four strangers that had almost simultaneously appeared at the Alhambra, the night before.

At the noise of the shots the floor between and around the two men was cleared as if by magic, and there was a combined cry of surprise at the sight of Brandon's face; but while Lightning Dick yet bent by his side he seemed to become aware by instinct of a movement in his rear among those he had passed. Three men in the familiar garb of monks were raising their hands.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dick, throwing his hand over his shoulder, at the same time drawing back his thumb, which then slipped off the clicking hammer. Motion, report, and a muffled cry from the rear came almost together. Then the Sport wheeled like a flash, with thumbs back and revolvers poised, holding the lives of the two men absolutely in his power. No snap shot could help them, because, when his thumbs loosened, certain death followed.

"Hold on, hold on!" shouted the two in chorus. "We weaken. You've got the dead medicine on us!"

"Hands out, then!" said a voice that seemed

to come from the young sport; but just at that moment there was a single report, followed by two others, and Lightning Dick and the two monks crashed heavily to the floor. Some one else had taken a snap shot and got in his work well.

Slaughter Bar looked aghast; but while the natives peered cautiously around, and the folds of Judge Schneider's robe dropped together again, covering the yet smoking pistol he thrust into his boot, through the doorway dashed Howlin' Billy. In one hand he flourished a pistol as dilapidated as himself, in the other his battered old hat.

"Blajer fishbites! but if ye'r men, git up an' howl. This time they got her sure."

A dozen voices spoke up, "Who?" "What?" "Where?"

"Little Lide! Ther Bullion Boss an' his men in white! They war goin' fur her lively, an' I run ter kerry ther nooze! Go fur 'em, an' p'r'aps it 'tain't too late."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH HOWLIN' BILLY FOR MASTER OF CEREMONIES.

THE diversion of Howlin' Billy was made at a fortunate time. A little sooner or a shade later would not have done so well. The Bar was just in the right mood for action and yet had not fairly become entangled in the work at hand. There were five men on the floor, to be sure, but they were all outsiders, as far as could be told, and Little Lide, who was every man's friend, was worth the whole of them. And as a whisper had already started around the room, that the Vigilantes were going to take a hand in, the conservatives were all the more willing to stay out.

A dozen or more men crowded around Billy, taking in his hasty and not more than half intelligible explanation; and then dashed away under his guidance, in search of the masked outlaws he had left following on the trail of Little Lide.

Three monks were down; three others were grouped at the other end of the room. One of these stepped forward and raised the prostrate Lightning Dick from the floor, throwing the body over his shoulder.

"I reckon he's done fur, an' ez he war a solid leetle man I'll see about plantin' him while some ov you fellers kin mop up ther rest."

As he strode away the judge reached once more for his revolver. It was a fair chance to dispose of one he believed to be the supposed detective, Dan Sliter, and to escape from the complications that had of late been gathering around him.

"No yer don't!" interrupted his *bete noir*, at this critical moment. "Yer got away from me onc't, but yer can't do it ag'in. I give yer warnin'. Not while I'm a-watchin' ov yer. I ain't sure but what I order take yer in outer ther wet ez it is, but we'll let her go this time, an' ef thar's nothin' better on the board we might ez well go, an' see what's become ov Leetle Lide. Hyar! hitch on! Give us yer arm! I mean it, so don't yer try ter crawfish out."

There was no escape without fight; or, at least, so the judge believed. As he was not ready for that, he silently acquiesced to the demands of his tormentor, and the two passed out together, following in the wake of those who had the advantage of a minute or two in the start.

And now, to go back only a brief portion of time, to see what was the foundation of the report of the man from Black Dam.

Harley Vernon had sauntered up the town again, but had not succeeded in obtaining another interview with Little Lide. Consequently he was left to his own resources, and had plenty of trouble making up his mind to meet the unknown correspondent who had asked for an interview.

Of course he had to take the chances of its being a snare of some kind; but in some way it had got into his head that the writer was Judge Schneider—and he was the very man he wanted most to see.

So, after one or two false starts, he set out, passing the Alhambra without being at all tempted by the music he heard drifting out through the open door and windows. Persons were passing in and out, but no one gave a second glance at him, as he strolled along without any apparent aim. It struck him that while these masked balls might be inter-

esting enough, they did not add to the security of the town.

He looked around in search of the shambling figure of his guide but saw nothing of him. Perhaps he had been afraid to come; or perhaps it was all a joke. It did not occur to him that he was too early on the scene, though he waited in patience, with arms folded, for fully ten minutes.

Of course he did not intend to stand there statue-like all night.

Tired at last he gave utterance to an exclamation of disgust, and turned to retreat.

Then, from the ground not half a dozen yards away he heard a voice.

"Copperheads an' coal ile, but yer in a hurry! Ding blast yer pictur's, can't yer allow a gentleman ter take er snooze, 'thout wakin' him up an hour afore the time? D'yer think thar's no one but yerself in the world?"

Howlin' Billy was there—had been there all the time—lying on the broad of his back, taking his immortal ease. Perhaps he had been asleep; perhaps he had been too lazy to speak; and perhaps he had been waiting on the chance of picking up some information by overhearing some soliloquy. Thinking himself alone Vernon might have spoken aloud if he had been of the kind of men who indulge in that way.

He recognized the danger that he had escaped, and was in no better humor for so doing.

"You wretched, worthless foxy vagabond! You're not worth the salt it would take to save you; you've been sneaking around, trying to overhear something, and if I did right I would tan your hide well for you and go back to the Pride. No good can come of an interview gained through such a Heaven-forsaken wretch as you are."

"It's right you are, me lord. Ef I war you I'd go, an' never find out no more nothin'. Why, ding blast yer hide, did yer think you'd meet Prince Ed'ard an' ther Seketary ov State with an escort ov ther royal guards? I'm nobody but ole Daddy Bender of Black Dam, an' ef yer don't want ter tie ter me—mizzle, I don't keer—cos I's paid in advance, you hear me? But if yer wants ter see ther party ez writ that note foller right straight erlong. I reckon ther time's up by this hyar blessed hour. What yer goin' ter do?"

"Follow, of course. Lead on without any more talk or nonsense."

Billy, who had propped himself on his elbow, now arose leisurely, and having given a glance around to satisfy himself that there were no spies or intruders about, led the way, taking the same course that he had followed the preceding night, guiding his charge straight into the little canyon.

"Hyar yer be," said Bender, cheerfully, as he pointed to the very stone on which he had deposited his hat and fortune. "Thar's a comfortable seat, an' yere's quiet an' secloosun. Doubtless ther party ez is ter see yer'll be 'round soon—pervided he ain't started no frolic with ther boys sence mornin' an' got his chunk put out. Ef he hez, an' 't show up, yer can't miss findin' yer way. Ef thar's anything in the way ov er small peconary testament ov yer gratytod, ez yer war goin' ter present, now's ther time ter hand it over, 'cos thar's ther chance, yer know, when I oncet skip out, ez we'll not meet ag'in."

Bender waited a moment to see the result of his appeal. When he saw no movement that looked toward the production of coin he turned away.

"Hold on, hold on! Certainly you are not going to leave me alone here in this desolate place? I'd as soon be in a graveyard."

"This are a graveyard," answered Billy, lingering. "Leastwise, I war berried hyer. Berried alive—an' ef yer don't believe me look at me grave. It war an orful high squeak. I thort Daddy Bender war goin' up ther flume."

He pointed to the ground near Vernon's feet; and there, sure enough, was the broken earth, just sufficiently visible in the uncertain light to shape the outlines of a grave. The young Englishman looked—and shuddered.

"You say that was your grave. How did it happen that you were interred; and how did you escape?"

"A short story. Me an' ther Lightning Sport hed er differuns ov 'pinion an' he sot me ter work with er spade. When ther hole got deep enough ter suit him he tumbled me in an' kivered me up. Er desprit sort ov er chap he are, an' don't yer furgit it. Take it easy. I'm

orff. Day-day! Yer won't hev long ter wait."

As there were no signs of the gratuity coming, Billy rather hastily withdrew. He knew that it was a silly prejudice, but somehow he could not bear to linger about the spot where not long before he had come so near to his demise. Harley Vernon sat there alone and uncomfortable.

If he had known that this was to be the manner of his reception he certainly would not have allowed himself to be caught in such a situation; but since he was here, the British bull-dog in his nature was aroused, and he swore he would see the adventure through to the end.

When the sound of Howlin' Billy's footsteps had died away in the distance, and for fully five minutes he had remained grasping his revolvers and seated in the shadows, he heard a light footfall, and almost immediately afterward, a slight, dark form bounded into view.

He was wonderfully surprised at the sight, for, if he was not very much mistaken, he recognized the dark clothing, the white hat and the swinging gait of one whom he had seen for the first time the night before.

"So you are my unknown correspondent," he said, rising. "Well, I am here, and waiting. I cannot imagine what may be your intentions, but I warn you that though I may not be your equal in the use of deadly weapons, I am armed, and if needful will protect my life as best I can. What is it? Speak quickly."

"Wait! Listen!" answered the new-comer, speaking, at first, with some difficulty by reason of hurried breathing. "I have but a few moments, and in that time would gain your confidence and give you mine. You are here for a purpose; so am I. We two must work together."

"Ahem! That remains to be seen."

Harley Vernon was inclined to be doubtful.

"Listen. Some months ago, in London, a man called at night at your rooms and promised you strange revelations in regard to your family affairs if you had the courage to follow him. Am I right?"

"You are; but how in the name of wonder do you know this?"

Vernon was at the very outstart surprised and interested. How did this person know the secret, which he believed was in the possession of but one other besides himself?

"Enough that I know the fact, unless you are willing to give me your confidence in return for my revelations. I believe you to be honest, and I have as much interest in this matter as you have."

"Speak, then. The moment I am satisfied that I am right in doing so I will tell you all that I know."

"My story will go back a great many years, when there were three brothers of the house of Vernon, all more or less dependent upon their father, who died not many months ago, covered with years, and sorrowing because for a score of years he had not known whether the two elder sons were dead or living, and because, if the world would have to share in his knowledge, he would sooner remain in ignorance. Am I not correct in my preface?"

"Perhaps. Go on."

"One of these brothers, frantic through jealousy, which, however, was without grounds, killed a gentleman by the name of Milton Waite; and the other brother, innocent though he was, became involved in the crime. They both fled, though not together. And the elder took with him his child. From that day to the night I have alluded to no one of the family ever heard a word of the missing brothers."

"True, true! Go on."

He was impatient over this preface, though it showed that undoubtedly the stranger knew much of the affairs of the Vernon family.

"Well, to show you my real interest—I am that child—the child of Edwin Vernon. Give me your help and I can prove it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BULLION BOSS CALLS THE TURN.

HARLEY VERNON had not yet penetrated the disguise, and was staggered by what seemed the coolness of this announcement.

"I won't deny that you know something about the Vernon affairs; but so do I, and this last is entirely too fresh for me to swallow. Haven't you a handful of salt to help it down? Your story don't—in western parlance—wash.

Edwin Vernon had a child, but, unfortunately for the truth of your assertions, it was a girl."

He had not noticed that the husky voice had been growing clearer, and now he was astonished at hearing a clear, short, but unmistakably feminine laugh.

"So you take me for the black velvet sport, do you? Thanks for the compliment to my disguise. I am the young lady that you had the honor of escorting home last night."

"Judge Schneider's daughter? Ah, that puts quite a different face on the matter. I begin to understand."

"I am afraid you do not. I am not Judge Schneider's daughter, but the child of Edwin Vernon."

"But he is Edwin Vernon."

"He is not a Vernon at all, but a rank impostor."

"Yet Martin Quigly, the servant who aided in his escape when the Lounds of the law were after him, confessed with his dying breath—yes, and swore to it—that Edwin Vernon had not struck the blow, but that it was Roger, who afterward died, and that I would find my uncle in the mines, living and prospering under the outlandish name of Schneider, which he had chosen to adopt. I went to Red Earth, and from there had no difficulty in tracking him here. I don't know what it was prevented my going straight to him. A few words would have settled the whole business. Backed by the confession of Quigly, I believe he would have no difficulty in retaking his place, so long forfeited. He has the Vernon face and look."

"Which he has cultivated for years. No, sir. The man is not my father, nor is he a Vernon, though I do not profess to know the dark secrets of his past life. You are looking for one of the family—you have found me. Help me to gain my birthright if you desire to be honest. Unmask this villain. I care little for wealth, but I do yearn to bear an honest name."

Vernon was staggered, but not yet convinced. He doubted if this was the woman of the night before, and he doubted her story still more.

"Then you mean to say that the dying Quigly, who of all men should have known Edwin Vernon, was mistaken."

"Not a bit of it. He was an accomplice. That I know, and it is because I know it that I am so certain of the rest."

"Girl, this is a strange story; but if you can prove to me its truth, rest assured that you will find me a faithful friend and ally. Yet I can hardly believe that a man of the intelligence and worldly wealth of him who is here known as Judge Schneider, would be willing to risk such an imposture. He not only lays himself open to a capital criminal charge, but in the risk of proving stands to lose the fortune that he undeniably has. I would rather believe that he knows nothing of Quigly's confession to me, and has no idea or intention of leaving his secure fastness here at Slaughter Bar."

"You are mistaken. He has an idea of leaving here; and until to day his wealth was more of show than substance. He had made a fortune to be sure; but he had sunk it in a dozen unprofitable ventures and I fancy that growing tired of the struggle here he had decided to carry out this game in a new land and run the risks. There is more in it than you have seen, too. But the strike at the Hair Pin to day has already changed his views; and he has admitted as much to me. He even tacitly admitted, when pressed, that I was not his daughter. If I am not, then he is not Edwin Vernon. Of that be sure. And I have another reason too—a reason of my own that I scarcely care or dare repeat—by which I know that my belief is not unfounded."

"Without a doubt?"

"Yes, without a doubt."

"Then, that is the reason for me to know. Once convinced I shall spare neither time nor expense in hunting down the impostor who must, already, have been guilty of some crime of which we nor the world have heard. The truth then."

"Ah, that is the one truth I cannot tell you—not now at least. But be sure of one thing. If at any time, you should seem to stand in his road your life would not be worth much. I am not certain but what already he considers you one to be disposed of. If he decides to give up the pursuit of the Vernon fortune, then beware."

"I have, no fears; but a great deal of curi-

osity. Tell me, in a few words, what you know and how you obtained your information. I will consider the matter to-night, and to-morrow—"

He ceased speaking suddenly. The girl had held up a warning hand, and to his own ears there had come a slight sound, that might be the noise made by a lightly falling footstep. At that he grasped the handles of his revolvers with a readiness that showed the lessons of the Bar had not been thrown away on him.

An instant later, and an eavesdropper coolly stepped into sight.

"No, I wouldn't shoot!" exclaimed a laughing voice, which Vernon had no difficulty in recognizing as that of Little Lide. "I've been listening here to the yarns that girl has been telling—or if she hasn't been telling them she has been hinting at them—and they are just too dreadfully dreadful for any use. The fact of the case is that I am Edwin Vernon's daughter, the long lost cousin, the wandering heiress, and all that."

"You!"

The voice of Nellie rose, scornfully indignant.

"Yes, I. I am the infant child who was provided for by Mart Quigly. My name was Nellie; and I belonged to the Vernons. I was my father's child, though, and couldn't stay taken care of. The result was, that this very worthy young lady slipped into my boots. That was well enough as long as it was only the thin bread and weak tea of the pension; but now, when my birthright is going you can trust me to claim my own."

Here was a new puzzle for the young Englishman. He did not understand it, and he frankly informed the young lady so.

"None so blind as those that don't want to see. I'm rather inclined to believe that that scoundrel, Schneider, is this child's father. At any rate no one ever suspected him of being mine. Here it is again, though I don't see how I can make it any plainer. There was a certain sum paid in for my support, and when I vanished—I was stolen by a vagabond, by the way—the 'lady,' in whose charge I had been placed, had the cheek, the sublime impudence, to wring in another girl in my place. The guardian, who managed the little investment which supported me, had never seen his ward, and the fraud was neither a deep nor a dangerous one, especially as I was supposed to be drowned. Those, yer honor, are the bottom facts in the case on which we crave judgment."

She made a sweeping bow as she concluded, and as she had spoken right out, without any seeming effort to conceal or befog her facts, it was no wonder that Harley Vernon was impressed with the brief statement.

Nellie Schneider, as it is perhaps best still to call her, was impressed also; but in a different way. She never had shown much partiality, now she positively hated this young lady, and the wonder was that she did not attempt to do her a positive injury.

"It is all false!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "You have followed me here, listened to my secrets, and on the spur of the moment, made up this story, not so much to benefit yourself, as to harm me. Very well. Do your worst. Your knowledge can do you no good; I shall see that it works me no harm. Mr. Vernon shall have fair chance to choose between us; after that, if needs be, I will go my way alone."

"Heigh—oh! You are getting tragic. I wouldn't. It don't pay. Listen to the voice of reason."

"Which will no doubt cry aloud from the mountain-top; for I am very sorry to say that this conference must come to an end here. A pretty netfull I've caught, though I wouldn't have closed in so soon if I could have helped it. I would have liked to hear how you all made out, but there's trouble brewing, and I hear the signal in the distance. Hands up, all! I've scooped you in."

The interruption came like a thunder-clap. In the distance they heard the report of a pistol, and before them, with a revolver in either hand, and a swarm of weird-looking figures behind him, stood the Bullion Boss, who held them at his mercy.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DEEP-LAID PLOT.

THE judge waited for some time at the Alhambra. He saw the various bodies carried out; some to undergo surgery, and others to

await a more convenient season for planting. Although an effort was made to set things moving again, those that remained did not seem in the mood for frolic, and the result was failure, though there was a deal of loud talking, interspersed with frequent calls at the bar. The fact of the case was, that the best men of the camp, with Fowler Wilson to lead, were off to the rescue; though even he was not very hopeful of being able to come upon the astute leader of road agents, who had terrorized more than one camp before he struck Slaughter Bar.

A man that had perfect, reckless courage, wonderful skill in attack, flight or defense, and a score of picked men behind him, was hard to handle, without a small army and a regular campaign. The judge thought of this, and laughed to himself as he imagined the comical figures the maskers would cut, streaming along through the night, striving to catch a will-o'-the-wisp. If it had not been for other work on hand he would have followed to see the fun.

But his face grew somber again as he stealthily glanced at the man who had openly attached himself to his heels as the spy of the Bullion Boss.

"Curse him, I would make short work of him if I wasn't afraid I would need his master. As it is, a little caution, and I think I can see my way clear."

A brilliant idea had just struck the judge, and he rubbed his head and then snapped his finger and thumb. Three or four men from the Hair Pin had entered the room, and were listening to a history of the evening's amusement. All he wanted, after they heard that, was a chance to say a few words in private, and the trouble with this man, who knew entirely too much for the judge's safety, could be arranged. That he could get the chance, he did not doubt, for his man seemed inclined now to give him a little rope, while he himself looked about for something more interesting than the game of wallflower.

The men from the Hair Pin recognized their master, and after a bit Bill Cole, a foreman, and a mighty rough when on the war-path, came strolling up.

"A lively old time they've had ov it, but if Sandy hadn't given ther boys a hint not ter come in till late, things would just 'a' bin a-bloomin' about three seconds after ther shootin' begun."

"Better so," answered the judge, under his breath. "I saw the man who did for the little sport, and he knows it, and sooner or later he'll do for me if I don't head him off. Don't let on while I tell you what the game is I want played."

"I'm dumb as a rock, an' I'll took ther other way, keardless like. Propel."

"He has three or four pards with him, but I can't pick 'em out. He hasn't tipped them the wink yet, but he gave me to understand the moment I spoke they would shoot. There's some bad blood yet about the Hard Pan affair, and half a dozen of them stand to chip in the moment the hat drops. Now, I can fool him out, and give you fellows a chance to take him. After that—well, he can leave town, or hang, or whatever the boys decide when they know the facts. I guess my word here, where they know me, is just a shade the best, and maybe he will confess."

"That's the lay-out? All right. Call yer game. I s'pose there's another hundred er so fur ther court an' jury. We're ther heft ov ther Vigilantes, an' it's time they riz again."

"That's the platform. He will go with me to the shanty behind the Pilgrim's, and when I say 'Now,' chip in, the deal's made. He's a sharper—shoots from under his skirts, and holds dead level—but I can fix him. Draw out as soon as you can and make for the ranch."

"But what's this about Little Lide?"

"That's most likely a yarn of that dead beat's. If not, what difference? I'm working on the other level just now."

The judge was certainly an adept at this kind of work. All this was done without exciting the suspicion of Pete Mahone, though that worthy still kept an eye on his victim. They would have had to be a great deal closer, however, for him to have heard what was being said.

Perhaps it may seem strange that Judge Schneider had not manifested more concern over the fate of Nellie, after her sudden disappearance; but the fact was that he was only obeying orders. Just before the flying leap he

had heard a noise that seemed unmistakably hers, exclaiming: "Don't give me away! Stay!" He felt certain that, seeing her danger, she had made the best of her way home. After that the fun at the Alhambra was too lively to think of leaving.

He seemed to weary at last. As yet no word had come from the contingent who had gone to the rescue. He glanced in a tired sort of way, first at the door, and then at the monk who was watching him. Then he rose and went out. As he came out into the open air he heard a shot in the distance, but scarcely minded it.

An idea had struck him that offered a solution of the mystery why this man had been hired to dog his footsteps. The Bullion Boss might have done worse if he wanted to keep track of the papers that had been in his keeping so many years. It would be hard to change their hiding-place without leaving a clew so long as this sleuth-hound was on the trail.

He expected to be followed, and he was not mistaken. He had not gone far when he heard rapid footsteps, and he halted until his pursuer joined him.

"See here," the judge said, sternly. "How long is this thing going to keep up? If I had done what was the right thing you would have been dead meat before you got back to the Bar."

"Two kin play at that game. Thar's three—er war three—ov us ez dropped to ther same racket; an' yer seen how it worked. When I pull on a man ner Satan kin save him from his las' sickness, fur I hev him foul. An' ef ther's ary galoot from hyar ter Frisco ez kin pull trigger afore I git draw'd—waal, it ain't you, Jedge Schneider, though yer no slouch when you do let loose."

"Something in that rigmarole, perhaps; but you don't answer my question. Why, I can raise the Bar right at you."

"An' hev ther Bullion Boss, who seems ter be fly ter yer game, down on yer. No, I reckon I'm safe enuf. Ez ter how long it'll last—till ther coin runs out—an' it's gettin' mighty shoal now. I'll see yer home, an' then, ef ther Boss turns up, I kin bunk in. I'll work spell an' spell with ary man; but I git tired when the work ar' spread too thick."

"Then home I go; and we'll have a little talk along the road. There's one question I would ask, though I'd be a fool to believe your answer, and that is: how, if you are not partners, did you all three happen to come together and buck solidly against the Bar, the first jump?"

"Can't speak fur ther rest. Ez fer me, I'd heerd ther Bar war lively, an' ther boys jist doted on sand, so thort I'd give 'em a waking up from ther go off, an' set up fur a chief from ther jump. Ther other two must er hed ther same notion, an' when I bounced through ther winder—thar they war."

This was the substance of his explanation; and in the midst of it the judge turned to the little shanty at which he had appointed the rendezvous with his tools.

"Hold on! This is about as far as I care to go traipsing in a gown. I have my duds here. Wait a moment while I go in and peel."

The request was carelessly made, but Circus Pete detected a shade of anxiety that would have been enough to put him on his guard, even if he had not seen the apparent nature of the trap.

"Thank-ee; but I might ketch cold standin' in ther draft. I'll go 'long in an' shuck meself, too. I kin git ther things in ther mornin'—er maybe yer wouldn't mind loanin' me ther key. I kin bunk right in an' save time an' trouble goin' any furder."

"That is good enough. Take the ranch for your head-quarters. I wouldn't wonder if we came to terms yet. I need just such a man as you are."

What the judge meant was that he needed him at a distance—say at Frisco. It was a terrible risk that he was taking, and he knew it. Although a powerful man, and quick with his weapons, the judge was not too conceited to admit that with such a man as this he had, in a single-handed struggle, very little to do. If Bill Cole and his pards had failed him he was about to do a very dangerous thing.

And whether the men were there he could not tell until he had put life and all at risk.

Not for that reason did he hesitate. He threw the door open and entered, followed by the juggler, who, as he passed through the doorway, struck a match.

At that instant the judge sprang backward, and throwing his arms behind him clasped Circus Pete around the waist. There was no chance nor time for resistance. Down to the floor dropped the two men together.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ANOTHER CAPTIVE.

As the two rolled on the floor the judge uttered the signal word and then shut his teeth hard, and with locked hands held to his gripe. As long as he could retain that he had little fear, for the arms of the other had happened to be held low down, and Schneider had pinioned them both. No chance had the juggler to obtain a purchase or to exert his strength. Like bands of steel the arms were around him, binding him to the living clog.

Then a flickering light appeared, and three men, headed by Bill Cole, sprang at the rolling figures on the floor. They had been there, hidden in the shadows.

And just in time they were, for, despite his advantage, the arms of the judge loosened, and he dropped almost senseless. Circus Pete had had one chance, and had used it. Throwing his head as far back as possible, he had swung forward with all the power of the muscles of his neck and shoulder, catching the judge just behind the ear, and then had given a rolling, sideways jerk, flinging himself loose—but right into the arms of Cole and his comrades.

Each one of the three was a Hercules for strength, and a panther in swiftness. They caught his arms and legs, crushed him with their weight, and bound him with ready cords. Then they tied loosely over his head a thin coat, and set him upon a bench against the wall. He could hear, speak; but not see his assailants, who, as yet, were not taking any chances. In case there should come any interruption he would never know who had struck in to aid the judge.

The latter rose from the floor, rubbing his head, and looking around like a man not more than half-awake. He was too dazed to be angry, and it was several minutes before he had recovered his wits.

"If it please ther court," began Cole, speaking in a thick, husky voice, that his own mother would not have recognized. "Ther's bin three er four bloody murders committed at ther Bar; an' one ov 'em ther Vigilantes must take account ov, not bec'ase ov ther party killed, but bec'ase er man et hed hed er row with him took ther chance when he war doin' his best ag'in' er straight flush ter warp it to him from behind. Ef those style gits interdoosed at Slaughter Bar, no man kin start a bit ov fun fur fear some tender-toed cuss 'll try er snap shot frum behind er door. We hung one Circus Pete fur jist sich er game; an' hyar's another ov ther same stripe. Shake him up an' see ef he don't pan out jist thet kind."

"Prisoner at the bar, what do you say to the charge?"

The voice of Judge Schneider took up the strain. No use for him to try disguise.

"I say it's all er put-up job," responded the prisoner, in muffled tones, understanding that he was addressed. "This hyar gerloot bez reasons fur wishin' ter be rid ov me, an' he's tryin' ter pull ther wool over ther eyes ov squarer men than hisself. Ther Bullion Boss are his pard, a bottom deal are his game, an' I seen him fire ther shot wnat took ther Lightning Sport out ov ther wet. I reckon yer goin' ter hang me ter save him. That's all right. I don't kick when it don't count, an' I sha'n't speak another word. Go on with yer chicken-fightin'."

Pete closed his mouth with a snap of his teeth that was distinctly audible; and refused to utter another syllable. Whether he was hopelessly sullen, or too full of pride, he did not even offer to raise his voice to cry for help. The shanty was by itself, some distance in the rear of the hotel, and there was now a sentinel outside to give warning if any one approached, but certainly the man could have made himself heard if he had made the effort. He stood there, a hooded statue, and heard the judge take the formal oath of a court of law, and then swear his life away with the most deliberate perjury.

It was all a farce, to be sure. These men wanted to murder him, and they would have done it anyhow; but they had been shrewd enough, it seemed, to plan to do it under a semi-legal guise. He did not even utter a grant of disapprobation when he heard the members

of the "court," one after another, pronounce the verdict of death by the rope.

"And over his breast," added the judge, "shall hang a placard, 'This is the man that shot Lightning Dick from behind. Tried, sentenced and execut-d by the Vigilantes.'"

"Now, boyees, strip him a leetle, an' we'll cart him down to ther free whar Circus Pete tuk ther jump fur glory."

At Cole's suggestion they would have torn away robe and cowl, but Schneider held up his hand.

"No. Leave him as he is. If any one else saw the shot fired they will recognize the justice of the sentence. Off with him. If he won't walk, carry him, and maybe you had better gag him before we start. We don't want the whole town turning out to see a private circus."

As the juggler refused to walk, he was carried, and there was some slight grain of satisfaction in that, if a man could find satisfaction in anything with death so near.

As the Bar was largely occupied in a different direction, and the place of execution was reached by a road that led right away from town, there was not much chance of interruption. So sharp was the action of the committee that in about the length of time some men would have taken to comb their hair, the condemned stood under the fatal tree, a noose about his neck, and Judge Schneider's hand raising to give the fatal signal.

"Good-night, my friend," said the judge, coolly. "You know the old saying, 'Give a dog a bad name and hang him.' You made a mistake when you chose yours. You are number two, and I shouldn't be surprised if a third was turned off within the month. Keep a lookout, and probably you'll see the other Circus Pete coming over the range. Up with him, boys. There's no further use for him here."

"I'm not so sure of that," interrupted a strange voice. "A minute, if you please. I want to see what this little game is. Uncover that man's head, and be quick about it, too."

The voice was strange, and yet there was something familiar about it.

"It's ther Bullion Boss, by ther jumpin' Jehu!"

Bill Cole supplemented his exclamation by a movement for his revolver, but paused as he saw it was a trifle too late for effective resistance. The road-agent chief never spoke until he held the drop. He and his men had their weapons out and aimed. The so-called Vigilantes were in a fair way to be taken in.

Nevertheless, they were men of sand, and perhaps would have risked the chances if their leader had given the word.

He did not; but, on the contrary, first and highest of all held up his hands as he gave the order to obey.

With the mask off of the prisoner the outlaw bent forward and studied the man as well as possible by the light.

"They rather have you foul, my friend; let's hear what it's all about."

"You're 'round at last," answered Mahone, thanklessly surly. "It's time you were comin', but I thort you wouldn't throw off on a cove that war doin' his level best to earn yer money."

"My money! Me throw off! There's something strange about you, my friend. What have I to do with your affairs?"

"Don't play off on Circus Pete—"

"Ah!"

The road-agent gave a sudden spring and seized the juggler by the throat, drawing him hastily forward, and this time peering into his face with closer attention, and then, with a quick movement, running a hand over his head.

"Who are you? What do you mean? Well for you, at least, that you are a liar. I am hunting for the true Circus Pete; and by the same token he is hunting for me. Both of us can't live long. You ran a big risk when you rung that name in on me."

"Don't play it that way on me. We talked that all over this mornin'. You told me ter watch ther jedge; an' I've bin a-watchin' him. Ef I hadn't done it a leetle too well he wouldn't 'a' run ther risks ov takin' me in ter-night. It war a cute trick ez done it, too; but that's all right now. It won't win ag'in. Cut me loose, an' let me go."

"My friend, it strikes me you're piling it up a little too thick. No talk did we have, for this morning I was twenty miles away. Strike

some other head that will pan out a better crop of truth."

"I b'leve yer afeard ov ther jedge, an' are takin' water," ground out the juggler, apparently exasperated by what he considered the cold mendacity of the statement. "An' I tied ter you 'cos I thort you war ther better man! Bah! You ain't fit ter lead blind monkeys ter water. Ask ther jid o' I hain't done ther w'rk jist ez yer told me. Oh, pull an' shoot. You ain't fit ter kick cripples."

"Don't be so fresh, my friend. How is this, Schneider? What is this man mooning about?"

"If you want to disown your agent, leave him in our hands," suddenly responded the judge. "But there's no use for me to tell a lie about it. He's earned the twenty you gave him this morning; but he's a deal too sharp. He may serve you well enough to-day; but to-morrow he'll take us both into camp. Better let him tell you all he knows, which I'll swear isn't much, and then leave him with us."

"And you set up the same story, too. For a dozen dollars I'll wipe you all out; but there seems a ter all to be something worth looking into here. I'll give you my word—and I don't often lie—that neither of you have I seen before to-day."

"Then hold your edge till I see what I'm going to do on my hand."

The judge spoke with quick earnestness. He was half convinced in spite of himself.

"Not a bit of it. From what I gather, he is a very worthy sort of a young man. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll let you out for the present. You and your men skip right out, and as for Circus Pete, as he calls himself, I'll take charge of him."

"But—"

"Against a wall, will you? Skip—I mean it! I'll see you again when I know more. By hy. And don't forget there's half a dozen revolvers looking after you. Don't you stop, or step slow, or there'll be some dead citizens lying round loose."

The judge hesitated.

"Git!" repeated the other, in deadly earnest.

Then Schneider and his men, thoroughly subdued, walked away, leaving their intended victim in the hands of the road agents.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW.

The judge was in a horrible bad humor and when they reached the street, at the Pilgrim's Pride he dismissed his attendants, who chuckled as they turned away. As yet they had no particular quarrel with Circus Pete, and so had no interest beyond a financial one in taking him off in an underhanded way. As for attempting the capture of the Bullion Boss, in which there would have been a great deal more money, they had been so thoroughly covered and the case was so utterly hopeless that they never once thought of it until they had repatriated from their commander.

With his hands deeply immersed in his pockets Schneider strode along. Although he saw a man strolling ahead of him he paid little attention to him. His form was just visible in the shadow of the long, low building. At another time the judge might have suspected a spy, now he was thinking of something else. As a consequence his rapid gait carried him past the man.

Then he felt a sudden slap on his shoulder, and looking around, there was his *bete noir* again.

"Ha, ha! Not a half bad game, jedge. Yer think I can't climb a chimney, eh? Nary wool did yer draw over the eyes ov Circus Pete. I seed thar war a game afoot, an' I let yer plant ther other man. I'm still around."

Schneider uttered a hearty curse as he staggered back from the thump, and stared at the man as if he was a ghost. He could not believe that he had made such a mistake; and if he had what did the other double want with him?

"So, you're both after me. I knew—or thought I knew—what you wanted; but what was he up to? There can be no mistake. He and that Lightning Dick were pards, and the black velvet sport was—"

He finished the sentence to himself; and the words he murmured were "young Clinton Bride."

"Kerrect, ez I'm willin' ter put up me coin. Me namesake are a bad man, an' he meant ter go through yer. Ef yer had ary specie, bullion er vallyble papers he war ther rooster ter swipe 'em in."

"All right, then. *His* in the hands of the Bullion Boss; and if there's no mistake about it—which I won't swear—there'll be no trouble about *him*. But how about you? If he is Dan Sliter who are you? If he is not Dan Sliter you are. To make sure, one way or the other, the Boss will save you both, for one or the other of you has come here to hunt him down."

"An' whar do you come in at? Eh?"

"I have nothing to do with any of you. There's been a mistake, and to save trouble I was willing to lay my life open to you all, so that I did not endanger my own safety. I had my other reasons, which it is not necessary to explain. I have found, already, that it is not safe. There is a hand in the game that you and I know nothing about. The Bullion Boss has a double, too; and it was that double with whom we spoke this morning. I've seen how you could serve the wrong man, now I'll give you the same chance over again, to serve the right one. I'm a solid man here, and there's money in my jobs, while it's pretty near certain death to buck against me. Which is it going to be? Say it now, and quick. For, or against?"

Mahone listened, was silent, considered, and then broke out:

"Ag'in' yer, by glory; an' ther man ez raises ther biggest hand rakes in ther pot! Look out fur y'ursel. Fair er foul, Circus Pete takes yer both. That's ther only warnin'. Now, step out. I ain't ready yit fur ther round-up, but look out when ther fun begins."

"And I give you warning that in another twenty-four hours, if you linger here, you will be a dead man! Go or stay; it's nothing to me. Good-night!"

For three or four minutes these men had been watching each other like hawks. If the judge had seen a chance he would have left the wandering sport there a corpse; if he had made an offensive movement Pete Mahone would have drilled him on the spot. When Schneider turned away he knew he was risking something; but he was firm in the belief that, unless his own imprudence hastened it, his time was not yet as near as some, perhaps, would have thought. The strike at the Hair Pin had the effect of taking away something of his ready nerve, for he had so much to live for; but it also gave him strength, for as soon as he had a little time to develop he had so much behind him.

"They are waiting because they are not sure of their game; but do they know who Clinton Bride was? Ah!"

The judge saw an explanation right there.

The story was half known, and though they were on his trail, it was with no certain knowledge of his identity. If it was the detective Sliter who talked with him that morning, under the guise of the chief of road-agents, then it began to be clear that the interview was planned to throw him off his guard, and get at the truth. He judged that they did not know for a certainty whether he was Clinton Bride, or a Vernon, or who, but that they suspected that he was a Vernon, that he and Bride were relatives, and that he, Schneider, was guilty of his death. As long as he could keep them in doubt who he and Bride really were they would hold their hands, striving to get at his secret. When they knew that, then, unless he took prompt measures, there would be an end to him.

"Curse them, it's life and death now, and I will kill them all—and I will not give up the Vernon estate, if I have to add this young fool—who is lingering around to make eyes before he speaks—to the list of victims. I have been feeling my way—to-morrow I will strike. If they think they can corner me, after giving fair warning, they are too grand a set of fools to fear. And one thing is certain. No proofs have they against me of any crime that would stand the cool tests of a court of law, for with them in their hands they would have either dealt me a mortal blow ere this, or offered their terms of compromise. Compromise? I'll compromise through Cole and his gang; and as for the outlaw chief—I begin to see that he's not after me, but Little Lide; and, by the heavens, he's welcome to her. It's the best way out of the mess, for there's something in that girl's face that makes me yearn to strike her a blow, woman though she is."

In some such strain as this the judge's thoughts wandered on, while he was striding mechanically toward his residence. There he halted at the door and glanced around.

He gave a sigh of relief. The spy was nowhere in sight.

"Now, a word of caution for Nellie—that is the part that gives me the first shadow of fear—to manage her. Strange how in a few short weeks I have learned to rest my hopes for the future on her! What strange power has she that she has but to command and I, more or less willingly, obey? And yet I have sworn that my will shall be hers. If I don't make a beginning soon, in the end it will be the other way. I hinted at the truth this evening; that was a mistake. Should she once suspect, I would lose the little power that chance has given me. I must be prudent and yet brave; cold as ice, and yet warm as fire. Ah, I have a difficult part to play for a few months; and most difficult of all when I really begin to reveal the truth. In the moment of awakening what rash thing may she not do? If I dared speak to-night, and have it all over!"

He concluded his soliloquy as he entered the house, closing the door behind him.

Through the little house silence reigned. He believed, of course, that Nellie had returned long ago, though there was no evidence of her presence.

When his thoughts came back to her they also reverted to the occurrences at the Alhambra after she had left it. Though she had so unexpectedly showed that she was able to defend herself under all contingencies here was a chance for a warning. Five men had been shot within a quarter of an hour of the time when she left, and he believed that he could show that the trouble was all due to her foolishness. It might teach her to rely, in the future, more on his judgment than hers.

Yet the house had that strange feeling that an empty building has, and nowhere was there any trace of her presence. The judge called and there was no answer.

Impelled by a strange, unreasoning fear, he darted up the stairs and knocked at her door. It swung open under his hand and the room was empty. Nellie had not returned.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FACE AT THE WINDOW.

VERNON and the two girls had no resource left but to surrender at discretion, though they would a thousand times or more have fought it out to the bitter end, if there had been the least hope.

As there was not the trio surrendered at discretion, and were sent away captives, under the guardianship of three of the outlaws; all of them, of course, being immediately disarmed.

As for the Bullion Boss himself, he and several of his followers withdrew from the cul-de-sac, but they neither went with the prisoners, nor did they fall back to meet the outposts, who harmlessly held the men of Slaughter Bar at bay and then inveigled the greater part of them in a chase which was hopeless from the start, and in which they were finally dropped in a way that was most provoking.

The few that followed Billy Bender, when the way was clear, met with no better fortune, for they found no traces of Little Lide, or of the other two, concerning whose presence the howler, with kindly reticence, had not said a word. The predictions of the croakers had been verified, since, without a doubt, the young lady had been taken in.

Curses both loud and deep were freely vented in regard to the absent outlaw, and had he been visible at that moment there was hardly a man on the trail who would have hesitated to attack him and his partners, no matter how desperate the chances might have seemed to be.

But the astute captain was not there; and none there were bright enough to guess that he would venture right into the town; though the reader will remember that he not only ventured, but turned up to some purpose at the judge's shanty, where he made still another capture.

And even yet the daring road-agent was not altogether done with Slaughter Bar. Circus Pete did not seem inclined to give any trouble, and so he was sent away under guard, while the Bullion Boss, alone, followed on a trail which only a desperate man like himself would choose to risk.

The result was that he saw the interview between Judge Schneider and Pete Mahone, heard some little of what passed between the two, and followed the latter—who did not, for the present, go very far.

He stopped in front of the hotel for a moment, as if debating with himself whether he should make the movement he contemplated, and then went in.

"That's his game, is it?" muttered the outlaw. "He's had it out, with the judge; and now he's going over to the other side. He wants to find out how badly hurt the young man was—for I reckon he knows that he's still living. Well, I want to know myself and if I know anything about the Pilgrim's Pride, I guess I'll find out, though I must look a little out. If any of the shooters see me prowling about they might get the drop on me before I was ready to begin. Lucky that I am posted."

Without hesitation he went around to the rear of the building, hurrying like one who knew the way, and yet cautious lest he might meet with some danger. He succeeded in reaching his post of observation just under the window that looked into a little box of a room.

Rapid as were his motions the man known as Pete Mahone had already found time to reach the room, and had begun talking in a low whisper.

When he entered, which was after a preliminary knock, he found the man of whom he was in search of—Lightning Dick.

The young sport had probably been sleeping; but he was wide enough awake now. His hand rested on a revolver that lay upon his bedside, and his dark eyes were gleaming with savage interest.

His face looked a little paler than it had done, and there was a cloth fastened around his head; but he was certainly a very live and very wide-awake man.

"Good-evenin'," said the visitor, with a quick jerk in his tone quite different from the drawl of the night before. "That war a bad racket they put up on you. Ef I'd had er chance I'd 'a' took er hand in afore you dropped; but it come so quick it war over afore I seed it, kase I war lookin' t'other way. Then it war too late. We've bin a-workin' on support leads; but ther time hes come, ef I ain't mistaken, ter pool our isyers. Will yer listen ter a leetle squar' chin music? Then, ef yer don't like my game yer needn't chip in. That's all ther is about it."

The young sport was sitting up in bed now, with a look of intense surprise upon his face. At this proposition he waved his hand and nodded his head. Circus Pete went on:

"In this thing I s'pose I'll do all the talkin'. That's all right ag'in. Shake yer head, an' I'll hev more time ter rattle off my chin music. When I'm through you kin foller my lead er jump ther game."

Lightning Dick nodded.

"It's this hyar way. Yer may think I'm er fraud—an' so I am. An' so be you. We're all on er different string—an' ther same strings are all in one knot, more er less, 'cording ter bizness. You an' yer pard kim hyar ter clear out ther road-agents; an' yer hed an idear that Jedge Schneider war hand in glove with 'em. I'm hyar ter look after ther jedge; an' I'm mixed up with ther condemned Bullion Boss, an' et fust I thort you war a side-partner of hissen."

The outlaw, who caught the drift of this, smiled grimly. He had not been mistaken; and by chance he had in his power the strong man of the two that were after him. Still, he listened further. Doubtless there was a good deal that would interest him.

"You are ther son ov Clinton Bride, er man what disappeared mighty sudden-like, when his buildin's burned down; an' yer mother war killed, somehow in ther fire. Ain't ther solid?"

The Lightning Sport nodded.

"About ther same time a tidy leetle fortune disappeared, es well es Clinton Bride's leetle darter. You never heard ov her, eh? I'm hyar on ther trail ov them, too."

The young man started, this time violently, and his black eyes gleamed brighter than ever.

"Yer never heard ov ther gal. Waal, she war livin' then, an' though some thort she passed in at ther fire, she are livin' now. More than that, she's one ov two gals—er I'm er Dutchman. Nellie Schneider, er Leetle Lide—one ov ther two will fill their bill. One ov 'em is yer sister, an' don't yer furgit it."

The young man was more than surprised—he was electrified. He sprung to his feet, forgetful of wound and everything else. He shook his fist in the direction of the judge's residence, and then suddenly covered his face

with his hands, as if overwhelmed by an unexpected possibility.

"Now yer on ther wrong lead ag'in. Yer jist thinkin' p'raps he's yer father. Not er bit ov it. Yer father war Clinton Bride; an' Clinton Bride war Roger Vernon, er his brother; an' don't yer furgit that. Ther jedge is Harold Varley, an' ther man what killed yer father. I kin take him inter camp fur ther murder; but I want ter make er clean sweep, so ez ter show who you be ez well ez him, en collar ther duckats when I take ther jedge.

"Your pard, the man ez purty nigh blocked my game by settin' up fur an oppersition Pete, is on his way ter ther head of the flume. The Bullion Boss hez him, an' he'll take you ef I don't back yer up. He's made er clean sweep, fur he hes Leetle Lide already, an' ef he hez I wouldn't swear he hadn't ther other gal, an' ther young Englishman that's yer cousin. We kin go inter this thing tergether now if yer say so, an' I ain't goin' ter give yer much time ter study. Put it right down in writin' an' then I'll show the balance ov my hand."

The man drew out a note-book and a pencil from his breast and laid them on the stand with the air of one who had but little doubt as to what would be the answer. His eyes were fixed intently on Lightning Dick, who, in turn, eagerly grasped the paper. At last he was about to say his mind, and yet, so firmly were his habits of caution fixed, he still held his ready pistol, and, as he stooped over the little table, his eyes turned from the paper to his hand.

On the second the pistol flashed up to a level and poised over his shoulder, while the hammer went back with its usual sharp click.

At the window the face of the Bullion Boss had appeared, as he peered into the little room. It was like a flitting shadow that came and went, but all the same he was seen and he knew it. He had vanished before the hammer could fall, and now, though he moved with the stealthy step of a wild beast, they could hear the sound of his retreat.

"By ther holy beaver, you've a sharp ear, er somethin'!" exclaimed Circus Pete, who had rushed to the window and gazed after the retreating figure, which was for a moment visible, but at which he hesitated to fire.

"It war ther jedge er ther Bullion Boss—which, it don't make much differens. He heared all I said, an' he'll scoop us now onless we take 'em both in. There's no time ter frolic 'round. It's biz'ness from ther word go. You hear me?"

The Lightning Sport nodded, but his hand flew over the paper. He was ready for work in earnest.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE JUDGE COMES TO GRIEF.

A LITTLE thrill of fear ran through the judge's nerves when he found that the girl was not in the house. She might indeed have lingered around the Alhambra, just as she had done the night before, after he thought she had safely arrived at home. In that case how had he missed seeing her?

Again. Some one might have mistaken her for the man she so much resembled, and made a mortal trouble for her on the way home. Had that happened, however, he would almost certainly have heard something of it, unless the party had discovered his mistake and concealed the body.

Then a third idea came to him, that gave a twinge almost like an entering bullet. What if the party who entered at the door just after Nellie had bounded out of the window was the girl herself come back to try her fortune with the sports of the Bar at the game of pistols and steel?

That was a wild notion, to be sure; and yet he had begun to understand that she was a wild sort of girl—wilder, even, in her way, than Little Lide. If such an awful contingency could be the fact, what had he done?

No need to ask that question. Though his hand had been low down, it had been held very straight, and up to this moment he had not a doubt or a hope that the ball had not done its work.

"Oh, I am wild, surely!" he said to himself, as he came bounding down the narrow stairway. "There's a difference in their hight, and I noted the buttons well. If the first was Nellie, and I'll swear it was, the second was a son of Clinton Bride. I would sooner believe that the girl has run away. Ah! I had not thought of that. By heavens, I half believe

it. She suspected something; she has ceased to believe my story; she has taken the alarm; she is off. Could she have discovered my secrets?"

The judge had with him still the safe which he had had at Red Earth. It had made about a wagon load of itself when he moved, and had been no little trouble to transport, and at first he had not only guarded it himself, but two or three men and women were so disposed as unwittingly to watch it. By-and-by, however, he had come to rely on the strength of the door and the complications of its combination lock. Up to this moment he had never thought of the possibility of Nellie having managed to penetrate its depths.

If she had, though!

He went straight to the safe, and examined the little disk. Once before a woman had discovered the secret of a combination, although that time it had been to his benefit. Why might not such a chance happen again, and to his harm?

He moved the light down so that he could see the little revolving disk.

Sure enough. It had been tampered with; just as it had been once, and only once, before. He always left it in a certain position; he knew that he had not moved it; and yet it was out of place.

He saw, and stared, open-eyed, for a moment, too much agitated to try the handle of the door to see whether the safe might not be unlocked.

"If she has taken the papers and fled my game with her is up, but—there will be a dead woman."

He hesitated; and then dropped the threat out in a voice trembling with tense passion. Whatever he might have felt for the girl was forgotten in that moment of wrath.

Then he tried the door—and found that it was still bolted.

He set down the lamp and with quivering fingers whirled around the wheel.

As yet he was not frightened so much as angered. In the excitement about his treasures he had forgotten the troubles of a few moments before concerning the girl.

The door of the safe flew open and the judge gave a hasty glance within.

If the contents had been touched it had been so skillfully done that even his sharp eyes were unable to note any disarrangement.

There was some money there—gold in little buckskin pouches, and notes in a drawer that he hastily opened—but his eyes rested longest on a bundle done up with red tape.

Though it might never bring him a dollar it contained a secret that he guarded as his life.

"Fool that I was to doubt. There they are, as they have been, for a dozen years, safe."

"How could her taper little fingers have found the secret that wise heads have puzzled at? No. Nothing but the crowbar and sledge can ever work a way in against my will; and I fear them but little. But Nellie! Good heavens! While I am mooning here what may not be happening to her? I must find her; and I will."

He swung to the door once more, shot the bolts into place and in another moment would have locked them there with a single whirl of the disk.

As his fingers touched the wheel a pair of hands grasped his wrists from behind, a knee was thrust sharply into the small of his back, and powerful man though he was, he felt himself torn from his feet and then dropped heavily to the floor.

"I've got yer this time, jedge. When I war on ther watch er while ago I seen yer usin' ther peekhole, an' I dropped to ther game. Not er whimper, sonny, er they'll be an ink-west in ther mornin', an' Circus Pete 'll pervide ther corpus. This hyar safe's what I've hed an eye on, an' when I see'd it open I thort I'd jist drop in an' help yer sort ther papers. That's right, no use ter kick. I hev yer foul, an' ther's only one chance ter save yer bacon. I'll hev ter tie yer up er leetle; but you put yer head in er bag an' I'll sw'ar yer sha'n't be hurt."

With deft speed a cord was wrapped around the wrists and ankles of Judge Schneker, a gag was thrust in his mouth, a sash was tied over his eyes, and before he had recovered from his surprise he was bound, helpless and voiceless.

What use there was to blindfold him he could not understand, since he had no doubt as to who was his assailant. The sound of

the voice was growing terribly familiar, even if a couple words that seemed to have carelessly slipped out had "given away" the now open secret. He could hear the bolts shoot back once more, and the safe door carefully opened.

After that he was deaf from rage, and for a few moments heard nothing, while the contents of his treasury were being overhauled. It required the sharp application of a boot to his ribs to bring him to his senses. Then he heard the voice once more, mocking and cruel:

"I say, jedge, this pans out bully—no end ov plunder; but it's on'y a trifle fur a man thet's made a strike like ther Hair Pin. Ther's some papers hyar thet looks vallyble like, an' I'll take 'em along. Ef yer think they're worth five thousand, call 'round et ther Pilgrim's Pride afore I've read 'em an' ye'll find me thar, an' ready fur er dicker. 'Pears ter me I hev ther edvantage in this game now, an' ef I don't hold on ter it, count me up fer three Dutchmen. Day, day! I'm goin', an' er mighty neat job I've made ov it, all 'round."

And actually the judge had a sufficient hold on his senses to hear the speaker softly leave the room and the house, while he remained bound, gagged, helpless and alone.

CHAPTER XXX.

BILLY BENDER SAVES TROUBLE.

THE judge had meandered along a pretty thorny path in life; had taken a good many risks, and been in many dangerous straits, yet he had never met with one exactly like this before, and certainly never one in which he had come out to such certain and immediate disadvantage.

There was no doubt in his mind but that the unseen robber was the man from whom he had parted but a short time before; and he felt that Circus Pete must hold a very much stronger hand than that which the possession of the stolen papers gave him.

"He thinks he will drain me of all that he can before he springs his trap, and then rake me in without mercy. Good! He gives me time! Only a week ago I hung his namesake; I would be the poor, pitiful, starveling fool he takes me for, if I didn't dispose of him. I'll kill him before another twenty-four hours. Yes, I'll kill him to-night, and it won't be my hand that sends the bullet, either. I've only been waiting to see his game. Only let me get out and at him!"

Then an awful cloud of unspoken and scarcely-shapen threats floated through the judge's brain, as he realized how difficult it might be to get out. Unless Nellie came back—and here for a few seconds the white froth of unspoken curses oozed between lips and gag—it was more than likely he would remain there for the balance of the night, with only a slender chance of being at his work by broad daylight.

In that time Circus Pete might have altered his mind and made his escape. Certainly the sport, tough, outlaw, detective, or whatever he was, knew that he, Judge Schneider, still as were his ways and great his self-control, was a bad man to handle, and after such provocation as this, would have his revenge, if he had to wade through flames lower and hotter than those of purgatory to get it.

It seemed like an hour, like a number of hours, to Schneider, while his thoughts were thus running on; yet, in reality, it was only a few moments, and at the instant he was thrilling with voiceless curses, the chance for hope was nearing.

Suddenly, and at no great distance, there rung out upon the night air the report of pistols, and a little later the sound of hurrying feet, that scurried past the house.

The voices were, of course, somewhat hushed and muffled to the judge, yet they reached his ears, causing him to raise his head and listen with an almost agonized intensity.

The noise passed on, dying away in the distance, yet they gave him hope. The man who had robbed him had met some of the boys of Slaughter Bar, perhaps Bill Cole and his Hair Pin gang, and there had been an affray. If they took the robbers into camp, and he could only get loose, there would be an end of his troubles.

Then he heard a single, returning, uncertain step, that came to the outer door and halted there.

What that might mean he could not guess. Was it some one wounded, or had the robber

doubled on his pursuers and come thither to seek refuge or revenge!

It was neither. Some one attempted to give the door a thundering knock, and as his fist fell on the panel it flew away, revealing through the door beyond the prostrate form, bound and gagged, and scarcely recognizable as a human figure in the uncertain lamp-light.

"Copperheads an' coal ile!" exclaimed a voice, "what ding-blasted racket er this?"

He was a worthless old vagabond to look at, but he had nerve enough and curiosity enough of his own. Without further delay he stumbled in and stood over the judge, who was making all the noise he could to attract the attention of the man outside, whose tones he had recognized as those of Howlin' Billy.

"Pears to me there's bin a job hyar, er ding-blasted, dog-rotted sorter cross-geared bit ov work ez orter leave er cumfutable browsin' patch fur ther ole man. Eljer fishbites! Hyar's ther safe scooped clean ez er whissel, an' ther judge lookin' ther wuss fur wear. Dog-gone it, judge, yer struck et rough, now, an' don't yer disremember. It war lucky ole Billy Bender, of Black Dam, war 'round, er ye'd stayed thar till mornin', an' then whar would yer bin? Chirk up, ole man! Yer ain't hurt, an' Howlin' Billy 'il hev yer ready fur red-eye an' pepper-sass in ther jerk ov er lamb's tail."

Billy was, in fact, as active with his hands as with his tongue; though he used his eyes also, and very good eyes they were. He had recognized the judge, and concluded from his vigorous efforts that he was not badly if at all injured, and had set about releasing him, though the task was not altogether an easy one.

He might have hastened matters by the use of a knife, but he had the wit that hastens slowly. He wanted the judge to positively recognize him, so that there would be no murder by mistake upon gaining his liberty. He turned up the flame of the lamp and removed the bandages that covered Schneider's face. Then he tugged and strained at the knots that fastened ankles and wrists. In the course of a couple of minutes Schneider raised to his feet and stretched out his arms, that were numb from the cutting, tightly-drawn cords.

"Did they get him?" he eagerly asked. "The villain, the outlaw, one of those who last night at the Alhambra styled himself Circus Pete? He fell upon me here in the darkness, attacked me unawares, and robbed me. But I heard the noise of the fighting, and if the boys dropped him I'll divide a thousand dollars in the crowd. If he got away I'll give the thousand for his body, dead or alive."

"Now yer' talkin' sense; but no Circus Pete war it thet took ther trick, but ther real, gen-oo-wine Bullion Boss bissel, fur I'm ther antelope ez spotted him come outen that thar door. I war on me way hyar ter let yer inter a bit ov knowledge w'ich I thort yer orter know, an' fur w'ich maybe ye'd loan me er quarter, er some sich peccooniary oblergashuns. It war him sure enuff, fur Circus Pete I seen streakin' it down-town with er chap I takes ter be Lightnin' Dick—ez I know are lightning, ter any sorrier."

The judge started and eagerly would have questioned; but Billy held up his hand.

"Hol' on, judge, till yer hear my music, an' then you shout ef yer want ter. I reckon now yer don't know what's bekim ov yer darter?"

"What?"

"Oh, don't be skeered; I can't sw'ar ter ther facts, but ef yer got any tetch ov ther spring chicken about yer gizzard—any sort er weakness like, when yer hear bad news—jist ketch hol' on somethin' while I bu'st ther budgit."

The judge did catch hold of something, with a fire and vigor that showed he had suffered no serious damage at the hands of the outlaw.

In fact, he caught hold of Billy's throat with a fierce suddenness that admitted of no evasion.

"You infernal, maundering, rum-soaked idiot, what have you to tell? Spit it out, or by the eternal I'll tear your liver out and take you all apart. Speak quick, or I'll kill you! Nellie. What of her? Where is she?"

The rattling gurgles in Bender's throat showed that he was making a desperate effort to speak, but the pressure on his windpipe was too much for him. If the fingers had closed a little tighter and held their gripe a little longer, it is probable that Judge Schneider would never have heard his story at all. When they unclosed it was only by a prodigious

effort that the bummer regained his power to articulate.

"Hyar it are, judge," he gurgled. "Ef ther agents got Little Lide, an' ef Miss Nellie ain't got back yit, it's more ner likely they've scooped her, too. She war ter meet er young feller, er bloody Britisher ez I reckon you've seen him; an' Leetle Lide, she knowed it, an' took in 'er hand too. Ther agent seems ter hev ther others, an' ef yer gal ain't got home, I'll put up my socks he's got her too."

The judge uttered a cry of dismay. If this man told the truth, the Bullion Boss had struck him for about all that he was worth, since he had his money, his secret, and Nellie.

"You lie, you villain, you bring this story to me in hopes of swindling me out of a few dollars. If you knew it, why did you not come sooner—when your intelligence would be of some use? Why, if this be true, you must be in league with the outlaw, must be his go-between. Come! Do you demand a ransom? If so, you will get it."

The judge was cooler now, but it was a deadly coolness. He could crush the rackety old man in his powerful grasp; but, instead of once more trying that, his hand dropped to the revolver in his boot, which he brought slowly up, cocking it as it came.

"Hol' on, hol' on! Eljer fishbites! hol' on! How did I know it war her? 'Pon me soul ter glory, but I thought it war ther Lightnin' Sport. She war rigged out till they war like ez two peas, an' when she passed me she didn't say er word, an' I didn't see her more ner er minnit—an' dark et that."

Howlin' Billy just now did not belie his name, for he had plumped down upon his knees, and was holding up his clasped hands in an attitude that was meant for one of appeal.

"And if this be so," said the judge, with his pistol pointed and his finger on the trigger—"If this is so, where is she now, and what is the meaning of this? You know more, old man, than you choose to tell."

A singular look passed over the face of Billy, though he answered:

"'Pon me soul ter glory I don't know nothin', but it ain't ther fu'st time he's played ther game. Didn't he corral ther boss ov a 'Frisko bank an' his wife, an' keep 'em till they planked down er cool twenty thousand? He knows yer hev ther rhino, an' he'll hold on till yer melt—ef yer don't steal er hand ez kin knock his flush."

Very true it was that report said that Bullion Boss followed the methods of the Italian brigands—but there was some chance of his having received a fatal wound, and the judge eagerly suggested it.

"Not much," answered Bender, somewhat encouraged.

"He plugged two, an' then lit. Ther rope is ther only thing ter faze him unless we wring in er cold deck. But you an' me fur pards, judge, could bring him, fur I know er wrinkle what never growed on er cow's horn. I'd be yer man ter tie to ef you'll put the Hair Pin galoots behind me."

"You? What could you do?"

Howlin' Billy got up on his feet and leaned confidentially toward his vis-a-vis, as he answered in a slow whisper:

"I'm er ole perspecter, I be, I know these yere mount'ins like er book, an' I kin lead yer straight ter his lay-out by ther back door."

"Then you are my man!" shouted the judge.

"By heavens! I'll have him yet! First, now for the Alhambra to look for Cole and his gang. That is the quarters they will strike for if they linger around this town."

"I knowed it! I knowed it!" exclaimed Billy, in a kind of ecstasy. "Them ez sez you ain't got ther sand fur ary job are barkin' up ther wrong tree. Oh, I've been a-watchin' ov yer fur er long time, waitin' ter strike yer fur rocks, 'ka'se I know'd yer fur sure ther minnit my peepers lit on yer. But I didn't think you an' me would be pards like this. Oh! we'll make a rustlin' team, you bet. Ole Billy from Black Dam knows er thing er two, but he don't go back on er stakeholder, an' he kin keep his mouth shut."

"What do you mean by that rigmarole?" said the judge, with sudden firmness. "It appears to me that I begin to recognize a madness with a method. Before I go a step further I must know who you are, and what you mean."

"Don't be afeered, judge. I'm on'y ole Billy Bender, an' I never throwed off on er pard yit. Copperheads an' coal ile, no! I'm solid. But

I knowed yer back Yeast. I spotted yer fur er lamb fur slaughter when yer war wringin' in with Clint Bride's wife. I'd er made er putty jenny outer yer then ef yer hadn't sloped. Eljer-fishbites, yes!"

"And now, to finish this infernal nonsense—who do you say I am—or was?"

"We's a-wastin' time," said Billy, beginning again to be alarmed. "Let's light out on this yere trail. Ye'll find me solid."

"One thing at a time. Speak. I am in no mood for trifling."

"Well, then," answered Billy, driven into a corner, "you war Harold Varley back Yeast, an' er bloody Hinglishman."

The judge's face was livid with passion, and even the broken-down bummer had noted the low but tense fury of his tone, though he was not prepared for what followed.

"Then you know more than any other living man—and more than any man can know and live."

His hand grasped and cocked a pistol that he brought slowly and steadily to a line with old Billy's head, but before his finger could tighten on the trigger a voice ran through the room.

"Hold, there! T uch him and you die! If you are Hailey Vernon—as you are—you have to settle with us!"

In the doorway appeared Pete Mahone, and just behind him the Lightning Sport.

Quick as thought the judge jerked his pistol up and fired, and as Circus Pete No. 2 reeled away from the shot, with a bullet in his breast, he fired again at Lightning Dick, whose revolver at the same moment spoke.

Up into the air went the judge's hands, he wheeled round and round, and then went to the floor with an awful crash.

"Copperheads and coal ile!" exclaimed Billy, solemnly. "He's outen ther wet."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CASTLE OF DESPAIR.

If the Bullion Boss could have been seen the following day seated alone in his stronghold in a meditative but not unhelpful mood, he would probably have been taken for anything but what he really was, since he had a pleasant, open face.

"All right," he was thinking. The game is made and the ball rolling, and I can't stop. I'm in for the entire figure, and make or break I have to get away from here. A fox don't steal chickens near his own hole, and I've kept so quiet that Slaughter Bar never suspected what a hero they had in their neighborhood. I saved them up until I was ready to leave, and now I've got the screws on for all they are worth. If I had the two sports out of the way, I could go down to the judge and dicker with him right in his head-quarters. He can understand that he has to see me safe to protect himself. Curse the sports, why didn't I shoot them both instead of risking my life to hear their infernal yawp! But they are after him as well as me, and a three-cornered fight it is.

"Meantime it wouldn't be a bad idea to interview my respected nephew—as he might turn out to be in case anything happened to the judge—and see what the necessities are for fitting him for a wooden overcoat. After that I'll look at my gem of jewels. Right there is where the judge and I will have the split, but she *shall* be mine if it costs a million. She's worth a fortune in herself. If it don't suit his hand let him throw it up and I'll deal him another one."

It is scarcely necessary to say that he knew nothing of what had occurred the night before at the Schneider residence after he left.

A foot-step behind caused the Bullion Boss to look up, sharply, though he apprehended no danger.

"Ah, it's you, Jean. Well, what is it?"

"The preeconaire," answered the man addressed as Jean, speaking with a strong French accent; "vat shall ve do voeth ze Circus Pete? He ees ze dangerous eenemy in ze camp, but shall he starve to death? Not ze food have he eet and ve have loosed not his hands for fear he get away."

"Cut his throat then," said the Bullion Boss carelessly. "I had almost forgotten. The information I wanted out of him—the certainty, in fact—I have obtained from another source. Yes, you may as well cut his throat and throw him over the rocks. I don't want him; and of course we can't let him go."

"Pardonez moi, but ze boys have ze spirit

not to assassinate, an' ze thing may make mooch trouble. Ze man hees tongue have used, an' say it all ze grand meestake. He have been von grand robbaire heeself."

"Can't they spell traitor, then? If he has been, and he may tell the truth, so much the more dangerous is he."

"He haz ze old friend zat recognize heem. He is ze Satain heeself, they say. Oh, he have ze long tongue; an', *sacre Dieu*, he used it."

The Bullion Boss uttered a curse at his own thoughtlessness. He had not considered that Circus Pete—whether he was or was not Dan Slitor—might use his tongue as skillfully as his hands.

He considered a moment.

"Give him what seems to be a chance, and then, when he makes a break, shoot him down. But don't you give him a show to grab a weapon, or he'll make a hole in the list. How many of the boys are here besides yourself?"

"Eleven, *mon capitaine*. Not too many eef we guard ze pass an' ze preesonaires while we have ze game vith vat you call ze Circus Pete."

"Eleven and two make thirteen," said the captain, musingly. "An unlucky number, but we'll run our chances. Arrange it the best you can, Jean; and whatever extra it is worth I'll pay out of my share. It was not a bad haul in cash I made last night. What one of the boys would have had the nerve for that? That will do. See that the prisoners have no communication with each other, and let the men understand it's a big stake I'm playing for. None of your fifty-cent hauls, with a chance for lead pills and a steel breakfast."

Jean, who held the position of lieutenant and captain's confidant, withdrew, his beady eyes gleaming at the prospects ahead. He understood what was wanted, and had no hesitation about doing it.

This intermural retreat of the outlaws was well suited for such a rendezvous. A little glade, let in between the frowning walls, whose sides were honeycombed with cavernous recesses, it had its advantages for protection, defense, retreat and impenetrability. Long ago, perhaps centuries, it had been used as a haven of refuge by some aboriginal tribe, now extinct, and its secret was lost to the outside world.

Yet it had its advantages of position also for those who knew its hidden trails, since the valley in which lay Slaughter Bar, though its nearest, was its least-used outlet. Three or four grazing grounds were within striking distance, and the Bullion Boss had browsed around them, and up to the last few days let the Bar slip clear.

As a prisoner young Vernon had been a success. He did as he was bidden, and gave no trouble, keeping his fears hidden until he could see in what way this affair was likely to end. He had more fears for the feminine captives than for himself, though the three had been forwarded with separate guards, and he had seen nothing of the others since the time of capture. He was sitting with his head bowed forward on his hands in one of the several recesses before which paced an armed sentinel. He did not even look up when a harsh voice addressed him.

"Young man, after this lesson, if you continue to be an utter fool you deserve all you get. When the Vernon estates were ready to drop into your hands, what devil of unrest made you cross a sea and a continent to nose around for an heir?"

Here was another strange turn in the game. This outlaw seemed to know something of the affair that, up to a few weeks ago, was a mystery to all the world. No wonder that Vernon looked up sharply.

"Oh, of all guileless simplicity yours is the worst. What was it to you whether the runaway felons were dead or living so long as you had the fortune of the family? Don't you know enough to get all you can and keep all you get?"

"I have heard of honor among thieves," the young man responded, sternly, "and therefore might have believed that you could appreciate my course. Perhaps I intended to make sure that no elder Vernon, or his heirs, should arise to oust me; perhaps it was in the hope that I could prove that the accusations that had outlawed my relatives and brought disgrace on the family were false. Either of my reasons were sufficient. What are they to you?"

"Much, perhaps. As I judge that your recollections of your relatives are rather shad-

owy, I might assure you that I am Edwin Vernon and your venerated uncle."

"Liar!" exclaimed Harley Vernon, starting up. "No Vernon of Vernon Hall was ever a robber. No trace of their blood lingers in your face or voice."

"From murder to robbery the transition is not very steep."

"But even of righteous vengeance I have found, at last, the Vernon hands were innocent. Yet what have you to do with this? I am a captive in your hands, I suppose, for ransom. I may tell you I am not as wealthy as I once was, but if you name a sum that I can pay I will do so, provided I first know that the girls who were captured with me have been set free unharmed. If we cannot come to terms on such a basis, kill me. If you know anything about us, you know the Vernons keep their word and never lose their courage."

"Yes," responded the Bullion Boss, with a dubious smile. "But if I happen to be a Vernon, too, of which there seems a possibility, we may come to an understanding."

"But you are not a Vernon. The one brother is dead; the other is in Slaughter Bar. That I know to be the truth, if there was any reliance to be placed in the man who did kill Milton Waite, and who confessed to the murder on his dying bed. I believed him then, and I believe him now."

"Oh, yes. As far as the particulars of the murder were concerned. They had unfortunately made their threats against him, and when he attacked Edwin, and Roger came rushing toward him with an empty gun in his hand just to see him drop from a bullet fired by an unseen hand, it was a little hard to prove that it was a man by the name of Quigly, a servant on the estate, who did the deed. Besides, it would have been ungrateful swearing away the life of one who had saved your own. When the avengers struck in, they found that the Vernons had struck out. There may be some other unimportant additions that can be made to the story, but that is the truth in a nutshell."

"The truth!" exclaimed Harley, in wonder and excitement; "but how did you know it?"

"I ought to."

"No, I will never, never believe you."

"You needn't to. Ask Quigly there, however. Perhaps as you have taken his word once, you may accept it again."

It was with a look of absolute terror that Harley Vernon gazed around. He had taken down the confession of Quigly and remembered his feeble voice as he spoke from what seemed to be his dying bed; yet now, looking up, he saw him standing there, behind the captain, alive, strong, ready to repeat or deny what he had before said.

For an instant only was the young man dumfounded.

Then a set look came into his face, such as one wears who has made up his mind and cannot be shaken.

"I see it now. It was all a trick. This man, who is Quigly without a doubt, was never sick, was never dying. He trumped up this story as your confederate, to lure me into your power. My eyes are open, and I can be fooled no longer. The Vernons are dead, and you are scheming to drop into their fortune. That so-called judge is a confederate. You cannot succeed. If you kill me you cannot succeed. You are not even an Englishman. If you had been that you might have had some chance, but your game will not work, and Quigly only put his own neck into then oose in vain."

Vernon spoke in a red heat of excitement; and Quigly, without having uttered a word, at a gesture from the outlaw turned away, while the captain, with the sneering look still on his face, responded:

"Don't be too hard on Quigly. I captured him on his way to Slaughter Bar, and what I don't know about his knowledge is not worth much. The judge has had this game in view for years; and I have had my eye on him all the time, ready to take the advantages at the right moment. He is the man that employed Quigly. Between them they did put a job up on you. He may have told the truth about the murder; but he hadn't any intentions of dying himself. He let the judge know that he had roped you in, but it took time to break his trail. On his way to Slaughter Bar I captured him. The strangest thing was that he was on his way breathing fire and slaughter. The judge having little use for him, and being

afraid to trust him, had set an assassin on him and he barely escaped. He fell in with my views and is now a very good road-agent. He expects to share in the twenty thousand dollars you will pay us before you re-enter the world."

"No twenty thousand will you get from me. That is sworn to."

"Don't be too sure. When I turn the screws on you will howl, I've a convincing way. Just consider the matter over; I'll keep you a day or two until I see what Roger—the judge I mean, of course—is willing to do."

"Ah. There you show your mistake. It was Edwin that had a daughter. You are caught again, Mr. Outlaw."

"There was nothing to prevent master Robert from taking a wife. He's a lively old uncle though. Before you get through you'll wish you had trusted me. It will be money in if you do yet. Day-day, and consider what I have told you."

The Bullion Boss quietly stepped away, without waiting for an answer, leaving his prisoner involved in a sea of doubt as to who he really was.

As the outlaw strode out, Jean, the lieutenant, met him.

"Ah, nevaire have I heard the man like to the prisonaire vat you call ze Circus Pete. No leave this spot will he, so he declares. And what a man he is! Ah, *bon ciel*, bevaire!"

"He will go, in time; and when he starts look out for him. His life or yours, Jean. Consider which is worth the most to you."

Without hearing further the road-agent passed on, leaving Jean to consider the problem.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SOME PLAIN TRUTHS FROM BOTH SIDES.

NELLIE SCHNEIDER still wore the black velvet suit in which she had created such a sensation at the masquerade. There was nothing singular about that since she had nothing else to wear.

There was not much danger, however, of her being taken for Lightning Dick, since with her mask removed, only a blind man would fail to see that she was a girl of rare, young beauty.

She did not seem hopeless or lost in grief; and when the Bullion Boss made his appearance if her face reddened a little and then grew pale, it was with anger and not with fear.

The outlaw made a low bow.

To look at he was handsome enough, and his manners were courtly even though they seemed assumed in mockery.

"Good-evening, my infant. You see that my words did come true. We have met again; and this time your protector who was so ready with his pistols, is conspicuously absent. You will pardon me, I hope, for the measures I have taken; but I felt compelled to hasten my suit, since I have concluded to change my head-quarters. Of course my intention is that you should change yours."

"Perhaps I shall; but I assure you that you and I will not travel in the same direction, here or hereafter. And my protector may yet appear."

"Lightning Dick, as they call him, is more apt to turn down than up, since a bullet through his head is interfering seriously with his powers of navigation. Anyway, he can never find you here."

"I see no reason why he should look for me—if he does he will find me, even if others who try should fail. You understand that your chances were serious enough before; now, you are booked for certain death."

"Ha! ha! Threatened men live long, and your humble admirer is not ready to start for that bourne, and so forth. Don't put on too many frills. I am your friend, now—or more than your friend. I am also slow to anger. Nevertheless I can be raised, and when that happens I am not too nice in my ways and means."

Nellie had drawn herself up proudly, and her words were those of scorn and menace, flung so straight and true that they stung even the Bullion Boss.

Now she too laughed, but there was a bitter ring that showed it was the meekery of mirth.

"A friend! Good heavens! What would a foe be?"

"Indeed you are mistaken. You have fallen upon the trail of a strange story, in which you believe yourself involved. Perhaps you are right; yet, I who know something about it, was inclined to believe that you are wrong; though the judge should know what he

is about. Don't forget; that is your strong point. Whether you are his daughter or not his freezing onto you is the best proof that your name ought to be Vernon. Unless he is as great a fool as myself, and having fallen a victim to your fascinations is bound you shall be the heiress. That would be a game for him to play."

The latter part of his answer took the form of a soliloquy, and Nellie heard with a troubled mind. There was a suggestion then that fitted into the case so fairly as to be alarming.

She began to grow interested in spite of herself; to forget the nature of the man with whom she was speaking.

"This other girl—this Little Lide! What of her? Who is she? I have done wrong. I should have met her half-way when she attempted an explanation. I had not the time. Can I not see her now? Surely you have done her no harm?"

"Too many questions. A week would not answer them. If you and she came to a square fight I am not certain that she would not win. I thought so well of her chances that I was willing to allow her to retire."

"Monster! You surely cannot have slain her? If you have, my hand can avenge her if Slaughter Bar forgets its duty!"

The eyes of the Bullion Boss dropped moodily and he did not at once answer. When he broke the silence it was in a different and ruder tone.

"Accidents will happen, and it is not always advisable to speak of them. If she threw herself over the rocks along the way it was madness; if she slipped it was unfortunate. Either way the result could only be a dead girl. Trouble yourself no more about her. She is removed from your path forever. I will know the whole truth when the scouts come in this evening—and will tell you then if you care to hear."

"And you did that?"

He shrunk away from her fury. His face even wore a look of regret. For the time being the Bullion Boss was in earnest in his pursuit of the girl; and he would not have shocked her in this way for a thousand or more. Of the retirement of Little Lide he was positively innocent; though up to the present time he had not thought of the construction Nellie would probably put upon it; having considered it rather a matter for congratulation. A girl who lived among the influences of Slaughter Bar might be led to look upon a dashing roal-agent as a hero; but the cold-blooded murderer of a woman was something else. This was no time to press his suit.

"If she still lives she shall tell you that I am guiltless. Not that bad am I; and when I have proved as much, I may also show you that in other ways I am not as bad as my reputation. But this much remember at all times, that sooner or later you shall be mine. The judge is a half-way villain, who can never reach his ends. For years I have known of him and something of his secret, carefully as he tried to guard it until the time came when he would dare to strike. One spy of mine he killed, crushed him in a shaft, and other murders lie heavy on his soul. Forget him. I and I only can give you the wealth and position you yearn for; and willing or not I have sworn that through me you shall receive them."

"And you think you can bend me to your will! Attempt it, and see. You have strength and opportunity. Very well, so will I have—if I wait. Sooner or later I will kill you if you hold me. Not in a vain struggle; but in a silent, treacherous, deadly way. A knife in your heart when you are sleeping, poison in your food when you least expect it—there are a thousand ways a resolute woman can find to relieve the world of a monster; and I am wise enough to choose the surest. But first of all friends must fail me—as they will not—and escape be impossible, as I do not admit. You cannot break my spirit, and you cannot escape your doom."

In all her life Nellie had never been so royally handsome as now, when an ordinary girl would have been crushed and despairing. Horror had given way to wrath; and with splendid courage she hurled her defiance at its object.

And his mood had changed also. His eyes sparkled and he looked at her with strange satisfaction.

"Oh, you are worthy of any man's love, my queen; no wonder it is that you have won

mine. The case is hopeless, is it? So much the more satisfaction in the winning. We will yet enjoy the Vernon fortune together, win fame and name in the Old World, and as for the judge—"

He ceased speaking and turned away, afraid to trust himself longer in the presence of the girl, with whom he was becoming more and more infatuated. Yet as he passed silently out, he completed the sentence:

"—I shall have to kill him."

Had he known he was threatening a ghost, even the Bullion Boss might have felt a cold chill of fear.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CIRCUS PETE OPENS HIS SHOW.

Circus Pete had noted that the closeness of the guard over him had relaxed; but his eyes were sharp enough to see more. He joked with the men about the chances of his escape as if he was bent upon sticking to them, and they answered him in kind. They looked upon his coming fate with something like regret; and meantime took all the pleasure possible out of his society. Within certain limits he roamed around at his ease, though no chance was there for him to reach the excavations higher up in the rocks, where the other captives were held. He was seated on a huge boulder, smoking a pipe, when one of the men with whom he had been exchanging experiences sauntered along.

"You've got a deal of nerve, Pete; an' I reckon you'll need it all afore this hand's played out."

"That depends on ther keards. It don't take much nerve ter hold four aces when they ar' royals. It's five aces er three that needs nerve ter stand ther last dollar on 'em."

"That's so, Pete; but fur the sake ov old times, I don't mind tellin' yer that it's mighty slim keards yer a-holdin' now. Yer know too much. Ef yer got erway from ther capt'n even, there's them at ther Bar ez would take yer in. They knowed yer war comin', and they hung one feller that carried yer handle. He got thar a couple of weeks ahead ov ther hearse."

"Thankee, Joe; but I'm all sirene. When ther time ter go out ov ther wet hez arrove I'll drop in ther bone-yard; afore that, ef it rains pitchforks I'll hev a steel umbrella."

"Ye'll need it, Pete. I dunno how they'll do it, but they'll put yer outer ther way afore long—you an' ther other galoot, ef he don't come down awful heavy. They can't pull ther wool over this chicken's eyes. The Cap's dead gone on ther calico an' he won't hev time ter work up any other lay, so he'll just bury yer both an' say no more about it. I'm sorry, Pete, but I can't slip yer a keard; I kin only tell yer ther size ov his hand."

"I know'd that already, an' I don't ask nothin'. They might do worse ner take me in fur a pard; they'd get a hummer; an' it's all a ding-blasted mistake. It's ther other chap they were after, an' hyar he's a-riotin' round ther Bar, while I'm took in. But, Joe, I ain't bunched my hand yet, an' ez you've done ther squar' thing, let me give yer this piece ov advice. When they try ter crowd me I'll most likely cut loose; an' when I cut loose, stand from under. You hear me."

"Kerreet, I do, an' I'll keep paws out. I ain't runnin' no risks, but I wouldn't mind seein' yer go through ther hull outfit."

"An' yer sure they're goin' ter kill me?"

"Ez sure ez one kin be in sich a cussed world. They hain't give ther sign yet, but it'll come."

"An' yer wouldn't mind seein' a leetle real genewine fun?"

"That's my name."

"Well, tip me the wink when yer think it's beginnin' ter git sultry. Then, ef you want ther fur ter fly, stir ther boys up ter see a leetle of my jugglin'. I give 'em a touch at ther Bar ther t'other night, an' they thort it war fine; but hyar I'll just make 'em shout."

Circus Pete was giving his hand away; but he knew his man. Joe Byers had something more in his mind than sympathy for a victim, and the man felt it by instinct, and took his chances.

A grin of expectation spread over the hard, battered face.

"I'll do it, Pete. I swar I'll do it; but don't yer make any mistake. It's a hard crowd ter crawl; an' that Frenchman's a devil.

Watch him, an' don't yer furgit there's a couple carbines thet's lookin' yer way all ther time."

Circus Pete shut one eye sagely.

He meant that he understood, and that no tempting bait would draw him into a trap until he was ready to go.

"You keep mum an' I'll never breathe a whimper. You do me a good turn an' I wouldn't wonder ef I paid it back some day."

"That's hunky dory; but it's ther fun I want. An' I wanted ter let yer know Joe Byers were yer friend. I won't risk more talk now, so look out fur yer rizzard."

Then he laughed, as though amused at some jest of the juggler, and went back again, while Circus Pete continued sucking contentedly at his pipe.

After he had finished his tobacco, he looked carelessly around him. It was well on toward evening now, and half a dozen of the outlaws were lounging in the little dingle, gathered together in a knot.

While the juggler hesitated, uncertain what to do with himself, though little choice had he, he saw the Bullion Boss and his lieutenant glide into view, coming from a rift in the rocks, which Circus Pete shrewdly suspected led to a pass through which communication was to be had with the outer world.

The captain passed straight on, and mounting the short but steep ascent reached and entered one of the doorways that seemed cut into the solid rock.

Jean, the Frenchman, lingered a moment and spoke a few words to several of the men, who nodded in answer. As they cast a glance toward him, Circus Pete suspected that he had been referred to. If it was to hasten the catastrophe that Joe Byers had prophesied, he was sorry, for he was not ready to make his effort yet. Still, if needs be, he could play his little game for all it was worth, and trust to luck for the end to be all right.

Without seeming to do so, he searched for Byers's eye—and caught it. Then he understood that the crisis was coming, and he gave an almost imperceptible signal. He saw Byers carelessly speaking to his comrades, and drew a long breath. Unless very much deceived he would soon be at work, and desperate work at that.

Soon the others seemed to urge, and after a brief hesitation, Byers came toward him.

"Look sharp, it's passed around to get up a quarrel and drop yer. Two er three men ez seen yer signs an' grumbled is out ov ther way on guard, an' ther's bad news come in. Ther other gal can't be found, so she must 'a' got clean off; an' thar's a couple ov sports, thet ther captain left a man ter watch, hez slid outen the Bar an' is s'posed ter be on ther war trail. Ther Boss is goin' ter git rid ov you and move ther gal. Now go slow, ef yer can't climber chimney."

"Thanks; I kin only try. You stand outen range when ther band strikes up."

"Bet high on that an' yer won't lose. I drawed ther wool over ther boys' eyes, an' they're wild ter see a leetle slight-ov-hand."

"It looks like murder, Joe, but them fellers—roasted my mother."

For the first time the man showed intense feeling. It was only for a moment, but in that time his face grew to be an ashen gray, and the listener heard his teeth close with an angry clash.

"Then you are Dan Sliter? Right yer are. Them's ther boys, an' Jean war at ther head. I'm a sinner on wheels, but if I'd been thar, ther' would 'a' bin some shootin', sure. Go fur 'em. I'll tell 'em you'll show 'em a thing er two, ter bet ther eyes on, like suckers at a country fair!"

"You may. Ef I kin lead them up I'll make things square; ef I can't they won't go no worse. I'm ready."

Side by side the two men advanced toward the knot of outlaws.

"Hyar he is. He didn't want much ter show off whar he hadn't ther tools ter do good work; but sich ez he is he's willin' ter oblige; an' ye'll find him a howler."

Circus Pete smiled dubiously at the compliment.

"Thar ain't ther chance hyar, right in ther open, ter pull the wool over ther eyes ov sich smart chaps ez you be; but ef I had the fixin's I might make yer stare. I'll do my best ter give yer a leetle fun ef ye'll stand back an' give me a show. Ther twist ov ther wrist kin beat eyesight; ef yer don't believe it—"

an' see. I'll begin with somethin' easy. Gimme a pack of keards."

The performance began.

The juggler seemed to have at his fingers' ends all the tricks of the trade. He made drawn cards appear from the center of the pack, told beforehand what card would come out here, there, or another place, and when the ace of spades had disappeared it turned up between the hat and head of Joe Byers. He made money fly from one hand to another, and several tried in vain to keep correct account of coin that Circus Pete counted half a dozen times into their hands. He spit out bushels of paper, tied and untied knots by a magical word; and altogether kept them very well amused.

"See hyar," suggested one of the outlaws, with a motion toward the hammer of his carbine, "ef we want ter keep yer, 'pears ter me ther safe plan would be to berry yer corpus. Ez slippery a cuss ez you be ain't safe ter hev sashayin' round. When yer wanted ter leave yer'd slide right out."

Circus Pete gave a grin and a nod.

"Thet's so; but yer hain't seen nothin' yet. Yer orter see me with ten knives a-goin' in the air, all on 'em ez sharp ez needles an' heavy ez a meat ax. Hyer, toss me three or four ov them pebbles. I'll show yer ther style ez well ez I kin."

He pointed toward several pieces of rock that really weighed fifteen or twenty pounds each, and they slung them at him without much regard for his bones.

He caught them easily, tossing them one after another into the air, and keeping them going up and down in an endless stream.

"Now, ef yer ain't afeared ter trust me with er few knives, toss 'em in one after another; but don't be too durned keerless. Yer might spile the fun afore it got started."

Jean Lemaire had been watching the performance with all the interest of a Frenchman. He nodded assent; and at the same time made a motion to two men to hold their carbines ready. If Circus Pete tried a rush they could riddle him with bullets before he could reach the nearest man. A pistol would have been different; they would scarcely have trusted a loaded revolver in his hands.

One after another tossed him a long-bladed, heavy knife, and as they came he deftly caught them, and cast them up until they formed a glittering, shivering, shining stream. He threw the stones aside and took knife after knife, at first using both hands, at last only one. It made even the outlaws wince as they saw the single hand moving in the midst of the dangerous wheel.

And then, while they stared, there arose among the rocks, at the juggler's back, the crash of a pistol, followed, after a brief interval, by the shrill cry of a woman.

At that the mocking smile left the lips of Circus Pete, and a hard, desperate light shot from his eyes. The crisis had come.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MIRROR MARKSMAN MAKES HIS MAGIC SHOT.

THE room in which Vernon was imprisoned was cave-like, but by no means a dungeon. It was similar to the one occupied by Nellie, and was separated from it only by a corridor through which the armed sentinel sometimes walked, and at the mouth of which he was always on guard. There were no bolts and bars; the man with pistols stood in place of them.

The ceilings of the rooms were high, and through the wall that faced upon the basin between the mountain tops was cut a window that just now let in a flood of sunshine. If Vernon had had a ladder he might have reached the canyon through this aperture without much trouble; though little good would it have done him to get there, since his appearance would have been the signal for a deadly fusillade.

There was another hole, not so large, near the ceiling, on the side opposite to the corridor, that Vernon, when he could think of anything but himself and his trouble, looked at with a curious eye. For that he really wished he had a ladder. He would cheerfully have tried the dark recesses that he fancied laid beyond.

Still, the case was well nigh hopeless. No ladder had he or anything else by which he could gain the provokingly tempting avenue

of escape. He could not reach it by a leap; and if he so much as moved around freely the guard came back and looked into his cell.

Just now that guard happened to be Mart Quigly. As there was another sentinel further out, who watched him, there was not much danger in ousting Quigly, even if Vernon should try to corrupt him.

At the aperture the young Englishman was staring in an absent sort of way when he was startled by seeing a human face appear at the opening. No sound had heralded the approach, and if Vernon's eyes had not been fixed on the spot he certainly would not have known that a man was peering into the room.

At once he felt that this must be a friend and raised to his feet.

Then the face was thrust further into the room, and he recognized one whom he had only seen once or twice—Lightning Dick—with his finger on his lips, in token of the need for silence.

He smiled and waved his hand. Hope sprang up at once, but he did not forget his caution. He would have stood there, noiseless, for a month; if it had been necessary.

A rope dropped into the cell—for the Lightning Sport was not so rash as to forget his line of retreat. The next instant he followed.

Not a sound had been made, and it was only chance, but at the moment they heard the footstep of the sentinel. Quigly was about to make another round. It was only a few steps, and he took them at irregular intervals. He had looked in only a few moments before, and probably the sport had noted it from behind the wall, and hoped for a season free from interruption.

Lightning Dick heard the step and understood what was coming.

With his left hand he pushed Vernon gently aside, while his right hand softly drew the knife that was in his belt. There was a tigerish gleam in his eyes; a set look on his face. It was not hard to tell what he intended. Immediately after Quigly made his appearance there would be one sentinel less in the world.

Vernon had no compunctions—if the sentinel had been a different man he could have seen him dispatched without regret.

But in Quigly he had an interest, that he remembered suddenly, and just in time. Quigly was a scoundrel; but he was an intelligent one, and certainly knew a little more about the complications of the Vernon affair than any man living. To kill him would be to annihilate the oracle.

Harley caught the hand of the sport, and whispered hastily in his ear:

"For Heaven's sake, do not harm that man—except as a last resort. He has knowledge that will give or take a fortune, and some day I may make him speak."

The other smiled grimly, and tested lightly with his finger the point of his weapon. It was not a question of fortune now, but of life or death.

"I tell you he has the secret of the life of those girls. Slay him, and they may never know who they are. He knows who Schneider is, and whether Miss Nellie is his daughter."

The name of Nellie seemed to act as a potent spell. Back to its sheath went the knife, and Lightning Dick crouched in the corner, his hand on his pistol.

Quigly came very near to death when he wandered down the corridor; but his good fortune was in the ascendancy, since he turned and went back without giving more than a passing glance within the cell. He did not see the sharp eyes that were devouring his face.

Hardly had he gone when the young sport rose and pointed to the rope. It was a way of escape, and the gesture meant—take it.

Vernon shook his head.

"Do you think I will leave while a woman taken with me is in the power of these fiends? Never! Yonder is the girl known as Nellie Schneider. I thought she was the daughter of the man with whom she lives, but since I have been here my eyes have been opened. No. I will help to save her or remain to share her fate. We can save her. Give me a weapon, and we will try it together."

Into his hand Lightning Dick thrust a revolver—there were still two in his belt—and then again he pointed to the rope, drawing himself up with an air that said—"Trust me; she shall not be deserted."

"Go, then!" said Vernon. "I will trust you; but, if you need my aid, call for it, and I

will come. But, if you can, spare that man. He will yet be the key to the mystery of who owns the Vernon estates."

From the doorway Lightning Dick gave one glance, and then flitted along the passage like a ghost. Quigly's back was toward him, and before the sentinel had turned he had vanished from sight.

He came with finger again on his lip, yet Nellie sprang up with a low cry of delight. She recognized him on the instant, and knew that he was there to save her.

He checked the words that rose on her tongue with a warning gesture and her voice sunk to a whisper.

"Ah, I knew you would come. You are my good angel. I shall be safe now."

His arm dropped lightly, protectingly, to her waist but his own lips never moved and he placed his finger upon hers while he bent forward to listen. It seemed to him that he heard the sounds of lightly dropping footsteps without, in the corridor. To be discovered now meant desperate fighting and fearful danger. Not that he cared for himself; but he dreaded the risk for the girl he was striving to save.

The fact of the case was that Quigly, still nervously anxious, had stolen back to take a sly glance at the man whose escape, should it happen, would cost him dear.

He looked in and there, with one hand on the rope, uncertain whether to go or stay, stood Vernon.

The guard did not comprehend, at once. He stood staring, and while he glared the prisoner suddenly made up his mind and sprang upward, catching the rope with both hands. Almost instantly he reached the aperture and was drawing himself in when Quigly fired and bounded forward.

Into his very arms dropped the young Englishman with a quiver and a groan. It was a snap shot but it had gone very true.

With the smoking revolver still in his hand Quigly staggered back, and then, turning, bounded into the corridor. As he reached it he found himself face to face with Lightning Dick.

Instantly two pistols went up and the two men had each other covered.

Only, the young sport had his hammer back, Mart Quigly had not.

And at that they held their hands. In this outlaw Lightning Dick recognized the man that Vernon wished to preserve, and even in this moment of danger he hesitated to slay him.

Quigly hesitated too; but from no such generous motive. He with the rest had heard of the men of the Alhambra, and the strange weapons they carried. In fact he had seen two comrades go down before him, even when he was dropping senseless from the treacherous shot of Judge Schneider. He understood the rope in Vernon's cell—and he understood something more. To cock his weapon would be his death-warrant; and even if he got in his own work first the answering shot was sure to come when the thumb of his foe, at the stroke, relaxed but a hair's breadth.

For a few seconds they stood thus facing each other. The long, slanting rays of the setting sun came drifting in through the open end of the corridor lighting up the face of the outlaw, showing it white, set, desperate, and waiting. He knew the report of his pistol would bring help. He could hear scurrying footsteps already and he was waiting for Dick to turn, or his eyes to wander backward. He did not see the eyes of the sport drop to his left hand, for at that moment his own wandered. A scream arose, and then the hoarse voice of the Bullion Boss:

"Down with him, Quigly, or hold him level a moment. The boys will be with you, and this cursed wild cat—I've left my tools—"

Nellie was fighting like a panther. She struggled and struck, though after that first cry no sound issued between her gleaming teeth.

It was a sharp struggle, but short.

The outlaw gathered her wrists in one strong hand, and with the other bore her toward the mouth of the passageway, through which had suddenly rolled shouts of dismay and the sounds of a couple of straggling shots. The weaponless belt of the chief told why he fell back.

And at that instant, with his eyes fixed in the mirror in the butt of his left-hand pistol, Lightning Dick threw his right hand up and

over his shoulder, and fired full at the skull of the retreating outlaw.

With a great crash the Bullion Boss went down, just as Harley Vernon, wild-eyed and bleeding, came staggering through the doorway at the back of Quigly, and felled him with one swinging, right-hand blow.

Then Lightning Dick wheeled, and with pistol in either hand, rushed along the passage-way toward the canyon and camp beyond.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ALL WITH THEIR BOOTS ON.

AT the sound of pistol and cry the outlaws started; the hands of the men with the carbines made a quick movement. Something had happened; they knew not what, or whether it was any of their concern. The captain had just gone in that direction, and he allowed no meddling in his affairs.

The moment of hesitation had its terrible price.

From the wall of rocks behind them rose a harsh, croaking voice:

"Hands out, all!" it said; and the men partly wheeled.

Then they heard another voice, which they knew was Circus Pete's:

"I've been on your trail for a year. You're the men that sacked my ranch and murdered my mother, and at last I have you foul. Curse you, I've come to slay!"

They wheeled again, quickly, at the cry. Several scattering shots tore around him, and then he got in his work.

The stream of steel still flowed from his left hand up and back, but knife after knife he caught with his right and hurled. No man could have emptied a revolver quicker or with more deadly aim. No jest was it now, but simple slaughter; and first of all dropped Jean Lemaire, with a knife driven straight through his heart.

Two men were left standing. Circus Pete caught the last knife by the hilt and bounded toward them, as for a second time they cocked their revolvers. Though the juggler seemed to bear a charmed life, the chances were with them, and seeing it, they were cool enough to take deliberate aim.

They dwelt a shade too long. Another shot had sounded from the cavern in the rocks, and now Lightning Dick, appearing at the open doorway, fired twice.

From the miscellaneous stock of weapons the juggler armed himself, and then made his way up to his friend. Save for the outlying sentinels and those away on duty, the band of the Bullion Boss was annihilated; and these two held the camp. Joe Byers remained to be sure, but he did not count; and Mart Quigly was in their hands a prisoner.

"How, in their name ov George Washington, did yer git hyar? I thort I war playin' a lone hand, but I held a born natural, with two aces ter back it, an' that kind ov a hand I'll find on every day in their year. I see yer hev found ther gal. Pistols an' death couldn't keep yer back from her—I might er knowed it—but how did yer find yer way in?"

Lightning Dick smiled, waved his hand and beckoned. He supported his double—Nellie, who leaned upon his shoulder, white-faced and shivering.

No wonder.

Death seemed all around them, and the light, black and cold, was gathering in. They could just see the outlined form of Mart Quigly as he staggered to his feet.

With a spring Circus Pete was at his side, with the muzzle of a pistol in his ear.

"Hands up!" he shouted. "If you move ter draw I'll drill yer."

The unlucky Quigly thrust his hands up and in a moment they were bound together, for Vernon faintly gurgled:

"Do not harm him. The girls have need of him."

"So you're here, too," muttered the juggler. "Quite a tea-party; but ef you'll take a fool's advice, yer wouldn't wait fur refreshments, but move right out. I've cleaned out ther Boss's pockets, an' ther rest ov ther camp won't pan out much plunder."

Nellie looked from one to the other. Certain things puzzled her, yet there was no time now to ask for explanations. The hand of Lightning Dick drew her, and the others followed. They entered the cell in which Vernon had been confined, mounted the rope, vanished through the aperture above and found themselves in another cell, with a lighted

lantern gleaming faintly in the distance. Without hesitation they pursued their flight.

When, after a tiresome, though brief, journey, the party came out upon a narrow path, which led upward and outward, a disreputable-looking addition was made to their party, in the shape of Daddy Bender.

"Elijer-fishbites!" exclaimed the hero from Black Dam. "Didn't I told yer so? All down but mine—set 'em up on t'other alley. An' thar's me ole side pard, Circus Pete. No fraud are he, but ther clean, white article. Shake, old boy. An' hyar's ther dashin' Nellie; an' me friend ther sexton ez berried me alive so's I'd think he war a desprit case; an' down yonder's Leetle Lide. When we march inter Slaughter Bar, ther' won't be no big eyes ner nothin', an' they'll sot 'em up solid fur Billy Bender, ther man ez cleaned out ther Bullion Boss gang. An' coin! Copperheads an' coal ile, what coin I'll hev when ther gents give me a starter accordin' ter merit."

"Oh, hold yer yawp!" said Circus Pete, wearied at last at having the bummer prancing around. "We've got ther back trip ter make, a funeral ter attend an' a cussed sight of chin music ter listen to afore we got time for you. We can't make ther Bar ter-night ef we fool away time on the road."

Howlin' Billy found it convenient to take immediate heed. He was a queer compound of alternate courage and cowardice, and knew by sad experience that whichever way he turned he was pretty sure to get into a scrape, though he had been peculiarly fortunate, so far, in getting out again. If he had been instrumental in doing a great deal of good by leading Lightning Dick hither, he was not at all certain that he would have any other reward than an approving conscience. The bit of talk had served to distract attention from Little Lide, who was hurrying to meet the party, and now quietly joined it. The two men had stumbled across her on their way thither, and it had been difficult for the Lightning Sport to prevent her following him into the outlaws' retreat. Her face flushed a little at the cordial greeting from Nellie, and it flushed still more under the pressure of Harley Vernon's hand. Then, together, they went down the mountain side.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE GRAND FINALE.

THE Bullion Boss had executed his maneuvers so skillfully that Slaughter Bar had been thrown completely off the track; or, rather, it had followed the wrong trail. Of course, there were plenty who paid very little heed to the matter of the girl's abduction; but even they were startled the next morning when exaggerated reports of what had occurred were freely uttered and discussed.

It was understood that some half-dozen persons had been shot at the Alhambra and in the street, as many more were missing, and Judge Schneider had been found alone in his residence with a bullet in his brain. By rare good luck and thorough management no one knew that Pete Mahone was lying in the Pilgrim's Pride with a hole through his body that would have let out the life of almost any one else.

Several indignation meetings had been held, the town was up, the Hair Pin mine men were raving. It was just as well that the latter were off on the search for the road-agents, whom they accused of the judge's death. When the weary little party from the mountains reached the Pilgrim's Pride there might have been some questions asked that would have led to an explosion. As it was, Peter Van Vedder hustled them in, and shut the doors before the gathering crowd had a chance to follow.

The girls had been informed of the death of the judge, and had been led to expect developments, but nothing definite had been told them of their nature when they found themselves by the bedside of Pete Mahone, over whom John Oaks was watching with tender care. At the foot of the bed, on a low stool, sat a comparative stranger, the Irishwoman who had arrived by the stage and with whom Vernon had had some conversation.

The two girls came straight forward and looked anxiously down at the wounded man, with whom the other Circus Pete had been closeted.

"Tell us the truth, if you know it," said Nellie, anxiously. She scarcely knew what to expect. "At least I was no kin to that man

who claimed me as his daughter. No father of mine was he. I could see it in his eyes."

"You are right," answered the man, in a reedy voice, "he was a villain—worse even than he or you dreamed, since he slew your father. He did not know that, though, for he was deceived, like the rest. Tell me, first, what you know of the story."

"Oh, I know nothing—nothing. I suspected him from the very start, when, after years of silence, he came to claim me from those who had at least sheltered, if not loved me. Then I found a letter from a miscreant in England that opened my eyes, though everything was indistinct, like a picture seen through a veil. Who are you? Who am I? Who is this girl—Little Lide?"

"My dear, I will answer your last question first. Little Lide is my daughter. I am Edwin Vernon, come back to life after weary years of wandering, and you are the daughter of my brother, of him who bore the name, for a time, of Clinton Bride, but whose right name was Roger Vernon."

As he spoke the man looked furtively at Little Lide, who, as she heard, drew nearer and nearer until at the last he felt her warm hand clasping his. Not very much of a father to own judging from what she had seen, yet such as he was she accepted him. He kissed her hand once, and then continued:

"It is strange that so many should move in the Vernon affair at the same time. Fate, I suppose. Each of us has caught up a thread or so of the hank, and now all is straight and plain. Here is the straight story with no embellishments, or explanations of who furnished the separate links.

"Very unfortunately a man was killed years ago under circumstances which seemed to implicate us, and we fled, Roger and I.

"Roger had the wealth of the family, his own and mine, and settled down to business, called himself Bride and afterward married. I put the true Nellie in what I thought good hands, in San Francisco, and wandered away. I could do 'most anything that was worthless, from the tricks of a juggler to riding a racer. I acknowledge that I cared little for my child and less for my brother and my fortune. I was all over the world, and being concerned in a South American revolution spent years in prison. When I got out I began to look for my own and could not find them. After a time the trail led me here. I adopted a disguise intending to array myself in opposition to judge Schneider, and shoot him down, when I could safely do it, without mercy. I knew that the girl he had claimed was not my daughter, but I believe now that he did not.

"The judge, in the East, was known as Harold Varley. He brought an awful calamity on my brother, and afterward having robbed him, as I believe, took his life. He had, however, the private papers of Roger, which explained the lives of both of us—and in the West he adopted the name of Schneider because that was the name I had given my daughter. I am not certain, either, that he ever knew who Clinton Bride really was. He had an outline of his scheme even then, though years elapsed before he perfected it, when he had met and got into his power Martin Quigly, a servant of ours. He intended to claim my daughter, who was heiress in her own right, through her mother, to a large estate, and taking her and Quigly pass himself off for me. Part of that he afterward modified by having Quigly make a dying confession, and afterward clear out.

"My brother had a son, who was born dumb, and by the calamity I have mentioned was thrown out into the world to shift for himself. Some time ago he met Schneider, as he was called, and was recognized; but did not himself know his own history. He found it out afterward, to a certain extent, and by a strange chance came here with another Circus Pete, who, I suspect was the original, and who was on the trail of the Bullion Boss and his gang. They formed the same idea, to astonish the Bar—and we were nearly drawn into collision. My double knew a thing or two, however, and found friends that helped him well.

"My brother had a daughter named Mary, who was sent to the West in charge of Mrs. Macarthy there. When the true Nellie disappeared, you, still an infant, and very much of a white elephant, took her place. Mrs. Macarthy is now a very worthy woman, and she recognizes you beyond a doubt—which was what she was brought down to do.

"The judge is dead—how he came to his end makes little difference—and his schemes are at an end. He has considerable property here that you might fall heir to, but I do not know that it is worth while to sacrifice your name to take that of a villain. I would advise letting it go. If what I suspect is true—the judge hints at it in his papers—the fortune of 'Clinton Bride' that disappeared so mysteriously is in a safe, hidden in the debris that chokes the cellar of his ruined mansion; while for Little Lide, as she will not long be called, there is a fortune awaiting her in England.

"As for myself, I am innocent of the crime that I fled for, and I am going back. Vernon, here, will go with me, and I think I see the way clear. It is true I have an ugly hole in my side, but, as you observe, I am still strong, and I don't mean to die for the present.

"But my brother—you say he is dumb, yet I have heard him speak. There must be some mistake."

As Nellie murmured this, her only objection, a smile came to half a dozen faces.

"That was what puzzled the judge—between them they mystified him awfully—and what even puzzled me. The fact is that Circus Pete is a ventriloquist, and was generally around to do the talking for both. As for his shooting—well, he is a wonderful shot, but a good deal of it was an old trick applied to practical uses. He looked and shot to the rear by means of little mirrors, and I must say that with their aid he got in his work beautifully.

"There now, cousins, sisters, brothers and children, give me a rest. I'm weary, and I want to sleep."

After the very full explanation given in the conversation just related, it is scarcely worth while to dwell upon any minor points that may not have been touched on. The family reunion and the story of the elder Vernon brings the narrative naturally to a close. As to giving a history of how Lightning Dick and his sister found their own, and more than their own, in the hidden safe which was unearthed without much trouble, and how Edwin Vernon safely re-established himself in his native country, and how young Vernon eventually married his cousin, and how one-half of Slaughter Bar fled the catches of their revolvers, so they would need no triggers, and how the other half practiced mirror-shots until the deadly reputation of the burg was much enhanced, and how John Oaks was provided for, and Howlin' Billy was set to his knees in coin, and how everybody else was happy or miserable as the case might be, and the Simon-pure Circus Pete went out to seek more adventures with pistol and cards—these are all matters of history, but need not further here be mentioned. The reader has reached

THE END.

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